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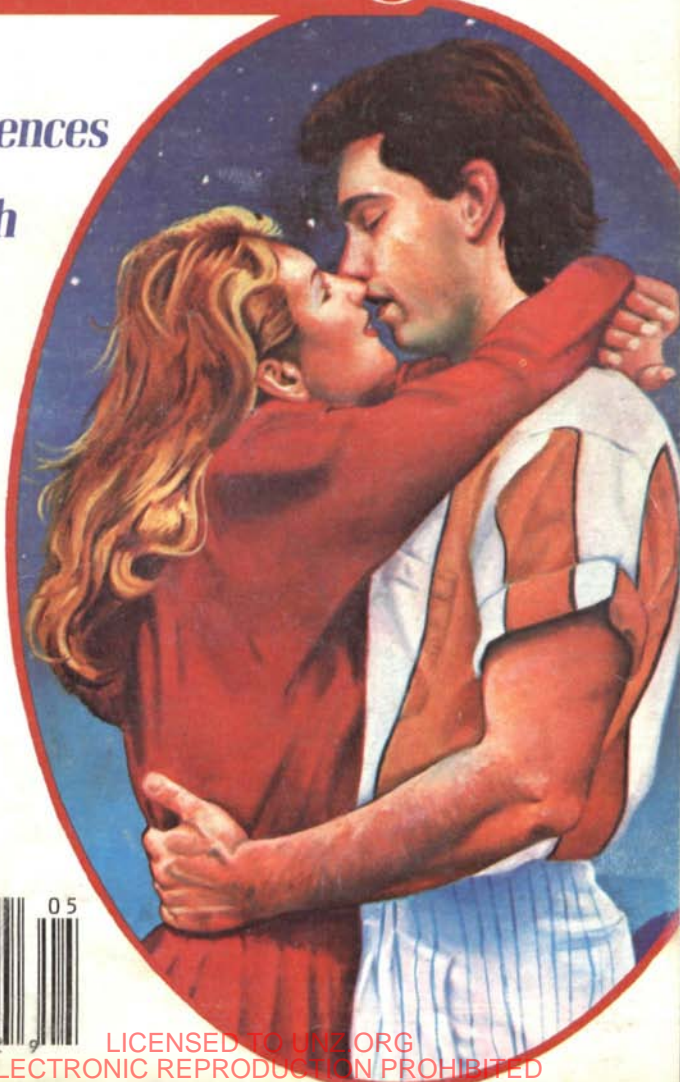
Little
Consequences

Love With
French
Fries

Happily
Ever
After

A Kiss
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Blue
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5 Great Romances

JULY/AUGUST 1986 • VOLUME 4 NO. 4

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Dark Lightning

When singer C.J. Alexander returns home to Louisiana and a simpler life, her former love, Slate Matheson, vents his bitterness on her. But the dark lightning of their maddening desire finally reveals the torment of lovers who lost their way.

KAREN KEAST

It was decided. Somewhere between the dying notes of the soulful song she closed every show with and the sparse applause that rustled through the smoke-filled room, C.J. Alexander made the decision. She was going home. Back to the sleepy country town she'd left a decade before in search of a brassy-bright dream.

In a cheerless, programmed response to the audience's appreciation, C.J. smiled and slid from the tall stool. To the

accompaniment of a second-rate speaker's shrill whining, she laid down the microphone and walked offstage. Behind her she heard the pianist closing up shop. Ahead of her she saw her agent Napoleon Price, waiting as he'd waited for her after every show for ten years.

"Good show, hon," he said, falling into step beside her as they headed for the dressing room. Even though C.J. was only a little over five feet five, Napoleon Price's short legs pumped to keep up.

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"What town are we in?" C.J. asked with a sigh as they walked.

"This is... uh... uh... well, hell, C.J., I don't know. Some town a few hours' drive from Lawton. Does it matter?"

"Yes," she whispered wearily, "it matters." And yes, she thought, it was definitely time to go home.

The dressing room was a converted closet, and when Price opened the door and hit the light switch, the small cubicle looked nothing more than what it really was.

"By the way, I've decided to go home," C.J. announced softly as she changed behind a screen from sequined satin to denim jeans.

"Yeah," Price agreed with his own trace of tiredness. "The motel's not too bad this time, is it? Although the bed in my room—"

"No," C.J. said, stepping from behind the screen as she tucked in her shirt. "I'm really going home, as in Coushatta, Louisiana."

Time seemed suspended on the fluttery wings of disbelief.

"What's wrong, hon?" Price finally asked.

"I'm tired of chasing an elusive dream, tired of faceless audiences, tired of a different town every night, tired of a bed I can never get used to because I don't stay in it long enough to... tired of guys who've had too much to drink and of women who look at me as if I'm some kind of threat... tired of..." Her outstretched hands included the room, the world. "Tired of this."

"C.J., C.J.," he said in a voice meant for stroking ruffled feathers and hurt feelings, "we're only playing these smaller rooms until—"

"Until what? It's been ten years," she reminded him calmly.

"But you've just made a demo record. And you've had some good gigs."

"Not good enough."

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"Yes," she answered simply. Turning, she walked toward the mirror, pulled a brush from her makeup kit, and raked it through her flaxen hair.

Long, long, and longer still seconds rolled by.

"Is *he* still in Coushatta?" Price asked quietly.

C.J.'s hand hesitated.

"I don't know," she lied. It was the first time she'd ever lied to Price. It was also the first time Slate Matheson had been mentioned in ten years.

"Is he still married?" Price asked.

"No," she answered. The question and answer revealed that both of them had done their share of keeping up with the man whose name was banned from conversation. "He's not the reason I'm going back," C.J. added, praying harder than she'd ever prayed that she wasn't lying again. Slate Matheson was dead to her, as dead as her singing dream.

"Didn't someone write that you can't go home again?" Price asked, obviously sensing that the battle had been lost but feeling the need to make one last stand.

"Thomas Wolfe," she answered, turning and giving him a smile. "But Wolfe hadn't spent the last ten years on the road, playing in seedy dives to liquor-headed audiences."

As never failed to happen, C.J.'s smile won the day.

"What can I say?" Price asked at last.

"How about good-bye?"

In the end, he did say good-bye. A temporary good-bye. He told her to go home and take a rest, and while she was basking in the lap of leisure, he'd ferret out the big break that was waiting just around the corner. With a last wave and thinly concealed tears, she boarded the purring

Continental Trailways bus and headed south...with a cardboard suitcase, a hammering headache, and a dead dream.

Fourteen hours later, and exactly one week after she'd made her decision, C.J. Alexander arrived in the cozy northwestern Louisiana town of Coushatta. As the bus pulled up beside Red River Drugs, the pharmacy whose back counter doubled as the town's bus terminal, C.J. felt her stomach tightening. Everything seemed so unchanged. For a moment, defying all known laws of reality, she was twenty-six years old again and looking into the laughing eyes of her fiancé, eyes that asked for so much and promised the same in return. She could feel the strength of Slate's arms, the heat of his breath and body, the brush of his lips as they teased before claiming. She could feel the rich promise of their future.

"Ma'am?"

C.J. glanced up, suddenly and embarrassingly aware of the bus driver's attention and the thrumming of the bus's idling engine.

"We're here," the driver announced as he squealed open the door.

Like a grass fire flamed by the March wind, news of C.J.'s arrival spread. At 4:28 Slate Matheson heard it. His reaction was a grim thinning of his mouth and a stony silence. He finished out the day at Matheson Lumber Mill, took his five-year-old daughter to his mother's house, then stopped at the Silver Dollar Liquor Store. There he bought a large bottle of something amber and fire-potent. The bagged spirits riding at his side like a lover, he drove home, a little too recklessly, and methodically proceeded to get stinking drunk. It was the first time he'd been drunk in a decade; the last time was when Special Delivery returned his

engagement ring.

"Aren't they adorable?" Barbara Spelling whispered through gritted teeth and a forced smile.

The tall, ballerina-svelte woman and C.J. stood watching the members of a kindergarten class committing five-year-old atrocities. One freckled-faced Huck Finn was gumming Play-Doh into the hair of a squealing Becky Thatcher; a black-skinned, kinky-haired cherub was carrying around a live—perhaps questionably live—goldfish in his fist; another little girl, with ebony-black braids and large blue eyes, was marking herself an uncomplementary blue with a felt-tipped pen. Not a single one of the twenty-two children sat in a seat.

Barbara Spelling groaned at the authentic smile wreathing the mouth of her longtime friend. "Oh, no. You really do think they're adorable, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to plead guilty," C.J. responded.

"Trust me in this," Barbara insisted as if she were talking to someone whose sanity would surface any minute, "you're just grateful for the job."

C.J.'s smile turned to laughter, which was barely audible above the merry din. "Maybe so," she admitted.

Truthfully, she was grateful for the job and ever mindful of how lucky she'd been to get it. In the two days since she'd been home, things had fallen into place with a precision that was foreign to her life. That first night back she'd called Barbara Spelling, the woman she'd led cheers with in high school, roomed with in college, and haphazardly corresponded with over the years. Bright and early the following Thursday morning, her good friend had helped her find a one-room apartment down by the bridge on Carroll Street, and later that afternoon Barbara had miraculously unearthed a job at Coushatta.

ta Elementary School as a replacement for the pregnant teacher, Mrs. Hanchy.

"I have thanked you, haven't I?" C.J. asked, suddenly giving in to the serious thread of thought as she watched the Friday morning sun bound through the east wall of windows.

"Yes," Barbara answered. "I think the present count is somewhere around a dozen times."

"Then make it a dozen and one times," C.J. said with a grin.

"It's duly noted," Barbara said, returning the smile.

C.J. gave her a fierce, quick hug.

"I'm glad you're back," Barbara said.

"Me, too."

It looked as though Barbara itched to say something else, but she backed off. . . the way she had seemed to back off from something several times since C.J.'s arrival. C.J. would have bet her paltry savings that the subject they were skirting was Slate Matheson. In a way, she was glad that the subject went unmentioned, though her need to ask about him seemed to grow stronger every day.

"Look," Barbara said in an abrupt segue to a new topic, "How about going to the country club with me this evening? They're having a band down from Shreveport. I'll pick you up around seven-thirty."

C.J. shook her head. "I don't know. I really need to unpack."

"How long does it take to unpack one suitcase?"

C.J. knew the reference to her meager supply of clothes hadn't been intended as cruel, simply as a statement of truth. She had admitted that her wardrobe was grossly inappropriate for anything but a performer's life, and that she'd left most of it behind. In fact, the camel-colored skirt she wore was the only really nice casual thing she owned. She'd have to await a paycheck to alter that situation.

"C'mon," the other woman prompted. "It's a kick-up-your-heels Friday night. You need to get out and press the flesh."

"Press the flesh?" C.J. asked with an arched eyebrow and an amused quirk of her lips.

"Get out. See and be seen."

Still C.J. hesitated. She wasn't sure she wanted to see or be seen. . . not just yet and especially in terms of one man. "I need to clean the apartment."

"You can do it tomorrow."

"I need to get groceries. I need—" Corraling the child with the goldfish as he ran past, she interrupted one conversation for another. "Hey, you want to go put that fish back into the water?"

The boy indicated that he really didn't. C.J. nicely but firmly insisted.

"Trust me," Barbara tossed in wisely, "after a day with these sweet hellions, you're going to need adult company and a stiff drink. Not necessarily in that order, I might add."

Just as C.J. was about to offer another objection, the little boy brought the fish back, proudly telling her that he had put it into the water.

"No, no," C.J. said. "leave it in the water."

"But he'll drown," the child explained.

C.J. then gave a cram course concerning gills versus lungs. At the end of said lecture, the child looked unconvinced; the fish looked bug-eyed. Finally C.J. abandoned dialogue in favor of an emphatic order, then watched with satisfaction as the child crossed the room toward the aquarium. Satisfaction turned to frustration when she saw the fish released into a pitcher of cherry Kool-Aid that was chilling for the morning break.

C.J. looked up at her friend with an expression of disbelief. Her friend glanced down at her with an I-told-you-so look.

"Seven-thirty?" Barbara asked.

"Seven-thirty," C.J. replied meekly.

She wasn't certain, but C.J. thought she heard her friend laughing all the way to her first-grade classroom next door.

From the moment she saw the child with the black braids and beautiful blue eyes up close, C.J. sensed a vague familiarity, but she had little time to analyze the impression.

"Guess what?" the child asked later as C.J., kneeling, scrubbed at the blue ink striped in an array of patterns across face, arms, and ivory-toned legs.

"What?"

"I don't have a mommy."

She spoke the words with no emotion. C.J.'s eyes immediately rose to the child's face.

"Mommy went away," she added, still with no indication of how she felt about the loss. "She didn't want to live with me and Daddy. We gave her a divorce."

The announcement alone of such a poignant fact could have made C.J.'s heart skip a beat, but the skipped beat was based on something more—something difficult for her to explain, even to herself. It had to do with an accumulation of suspicions and feelings. It had to do with the child's parents being divorced, but it also had something to do with the child's faint familiarity...with the midnight blackness of her hair, which reminded C.J. of someone else's—one male someone else's.

The little girl was familiar because she was like the child she and Slate had fantasized would be theirs: She would have his black hair, her blue eyes, his incredibly sensuous mouth, her delicate features.

C.J. felt something deep within her, a something she'd believed already dead, breathe life again. Was it possible? Could this child be...

"What's your name?" she asked, then held her breath.

"Rebecca. My daddy calls me Becca."

"Rebecca... Becca... Matheson?"

The child nodded.

And C.J.'s world tumbled from its safe mooring.

Oh, God, was it possible that this was Slate's child? Not only was it possible, wasn't it probable? She knew he'd been married, that he was divorced, and that he had a child, a daughter. But surely the child lived with her mother—somewhere out of state, C.J. thought. Why surely? More and more fathers were raising their children.

"I forgot," Becca said, handing a note to C.J., then crossing the room to curl down on her Snoopy bedroll.

As C.J. carefully thumbed open the folded note she immediately saw that it was on Matheson Lumber Mill stationery. Her heart quickened its pace. She knew! She knew! She forced herself to read on. The note, short and polite, informed that Becca had a doctor's appointment and that her father would pick her up at one forty-five. The note was signed: Slate Matheson.

Her thundering heart now threatened to jump from her chest, and a leaden ball settled in the pit of her stomach. She checked her watch. Thirty minutes. He'd be there in thirty minutes! What would *she* say? Would she tell him what she'd wanted to tell him a thousand times? Would she confess: I made a mistake, Slate. I never should have chosen a career over marriage. Would she tell him that when he'd given her the ultimatum just months short of their wedding—marry me or chase your singing dream—she had honestly thought she could have both? She had thought that he would come to his senses, that their love would find a way, that she could sing *and* be Mrs. Slate Matheson.

C.J. gave a soulful sigh, the kind that had been her ever-faithful companion.

When she'd left for that first singing engagement, she hadn't taken into account the Matheson pride. He hadn't come to her. Days had passed into weeks, weeks into months, and finally news had filtered to her that he was dating other women. She had sent back his ring and, in so doing, had died a little. Four years later, when word reached her of his marriage, she had died a lot. And had gone on dying, little by little, until the C.J. Alexander of today was heart-hollow.

He was late, Slate Matheson thought as he braked the white hard-topped Jeep to a halt in front of the school. He cut the engine and threw open the door, blinking as the sun's harsh brightness assaulted his sensitive eyes. Damn, he'd tied one on Wednesday night! he admitted, starting for the building at a purposeful pace. Two days later and his head still felt as if a sledgehammer were pounding behind his eyes. And the worst part was that his evening's escapade had been only a partial success. An image of blond hair and blue eyes had persisted despite his intoxication.

The school hallway was deserted, and Slate allowed his mood to mellow in the shady cool ricocheting off metal lockers and wooden floor. Unhesitatingly, he walked toward the farthest door and, without knocking, opened it and walked in.

C.J. raised her eyes to a slight noise just as Slate took that first step. The worlds of two fools collided. Though she was expecting him, she felt an instant sinking sensation in her stomach, like an elevator dropping too far too fast. As for Slate, his eyes widened in disbelief milliseconds before his heart struck up a rhythm that pounded a fresh ache through his head.

Her hands on the desk levering her upward, C.J. slowly rose from the chair and started toward him. Her eyes sent a hundred messages to her brain, all of which translated to one fact: The years, though

obligated to take some toll, had been kind to Slate Matheson. His hair was still as black as the darkest night, his eyes the sparkling green of emeralds in champagne, and his body, fitted into a white knit shirt and tight jeans, still looked as if it had been made for only one purpose: to please a woman.

"Hello, Slate," she half-spoke, half-whispered. She chastised herself for not thinking of something more clever to say, but in the end congratulated herself that she was able to speak at all.

In that unguarded moment, when the sweet sound of her voice drifted about him, a green fire blazed in Slate's eyes, a green fire that slowly chilled to frost.

"Well, well," he drawled, "I'd heard you were back. What's wrong? A slow week in the dazzling career of C.J. Alexander?"

"Actually, it's been a slow ten years," she replied with an honesty that Slate seemed to have trouble dealing with. For a moment.

"So what did you do, come home to rest up so you could hit the road again?" Before she could answer, he sneered, "Dream-chasing must be real tiring."

"Yes, it is...tiring," she again answered truthfully. "And, no, I'm not here resting up. I've come home to stay."

A mirthless smile slinked across his lips, matched by the derision in his eyes. "You'll pardon me if I don't buy shares in that notion."

Her heart bled at the knife-thrust of his words. "You're angry," she said incredulously. Whatever she'd expected his reaction to be, it hadn't been anger.

"Where's Mrs. Hanchy?" Slate asked, finally breaking the tightly sprung silence.

"She resigned." At the upward arch of a black brow, she added, "She's having a difficult pregnancy."

"And you're filling in until a replacement can be found?"

"No," C.J. answered. "I am the replacement."

They were back to silence . . . and barbed replies fed by the hurt and loneliness of years. "I hope they haven't thrown the list of substitutes away."

On some plane of thought C.J. told herself she'd been wrong to think that there had been few changes in Slate. He'd grown cold, hard, not at all the loving man she'd once known. She suddenly wondered if she was solely responsible for that coldness. Had his wife also hurt him? Had she deserted him, too?

"I'm sorry," C.J. whispered, not at all certain, what she was apologizing for—certainly for her contribution to his bitterness, maybe even for another woman's, maybe even for that unfair way life had of putting a frown on a mouth that once so easily smiled.

"Spare me your concern," he bit out, as he walked over and hunched down before Becca. Brushing back her bangs, he whispered, "Becca? Hey, baby, wake up."

Becca Matheson stirred, then opened groggy eyes.

C.J. saw Slate smile, a full, committed curving of his lips, and thought, Now, here is the man I remember.

"Hey, muffin," Slate crooned, "you ready to go?"

Becca yawned, squirmed her little body like a teddy bear coming out of hibernation, and reached out her arms to the man above her.

"Her dress . . ." C.J. began, walking to them and dragging her thoughts back to the issue at hand. She stepped forward and tugged at the front of Becca's dress. "We had a little incident this morning. She found a felt-tipped pen."

"Rebecca Matheson," he reproached, though his voice was too gentle to carry a reprimand. He shifted the child to the other side, his arm resting firmly under

her petite derriere.

"I washed it off her," C.J. said, "but the dress—"

"I didn't cry, Daddy," Becca cut in. "I was a big girl."

C.J. smiled. "Yes, you were a big girl." Her eyes traveling up to Slate's, she said, "If you want me to, I'll try to get it out of the dress. I could take it and—"

"We don't need your help," he interrupted coldly. "I can take care of my daughter."

C.J. swallowed back the sudden lump in her throat. "I never meant to imply you couldn't. I simply—"

"Don't imply anything in my life," he shot back.

With that, he turned and stalked out of the room.

C.J. was left fighting tears she would have shed had not her pride been as great as Slate's.

"What didn't you tell me that Slate's daughter was in my class?" C.J. asked Barbara later that evening as they drove to the country club in Shreveport.

Barbara's eyes slid to her passenger. A look of surprise, followed by one of apology, raced across her face. "I thought you knew."

"How could I have known?" C.J.'s voice, though not condemning, revealed the day's strain.

"C.J., I'm so sorry," her friend said. "I'm so—" Suddenly she stopped, her posture squaring in her own defense. "You know, it's not as if you've encouraged me to talk about Slate. Over the years I've steered clear of the topic because you always resisted hearing anything about him, and since you've been back . . ."

"It's all right, Barb," C.J. interrupted, touching the woman's arm in reassurance. "Honest." She sighed and leaned her head back against the seat. The car

hummed gently, almost relaxing her tense neck muscles. "It's just that I've had a rotten day."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse," C.J. cringed, inwardly and outwardly, at just how devastating her day had been. "Slate picked Becca up early."

"Good grief. You did have a bad day."

"Yeah."

"What happened between the two of you?" Barbara Spelling inquired as softly as one walking on eggshells. "I mean, you two were so in love."

C.J. raised her head from the back of the seat, sat upright, and toyed with a ruffle of the black chiffon dress that contrasted so noticeably with her friend's simpler cotton blouse and skirt. She shrugged. "A miscalculation in judgment. I stupidly thought that love conquered all."

"Even the Matheson pride?" Barbara ventured.

"Even the Matheson pride."

"He didn't want you to sing, did he?"

"I don't know whether he objected to the singing, to my going away, or to my earning money when he wasn't."

It suddenly struck C.J. as ironic that, for an issue that had had such a monumental impact on her life, she really had few answers as to its why. But then, much of life seemed ironic. There was no doubt that Slate had wanted her by his side, not off singing to strangers, while he stayed home to help operate the family lumber business, but C.J. suspected the problem rested most squarely on the shoulders of money. Or his lack of it. He had been adamant about being able to support her before he took her as his wife. It was an old-fashioned idea, but then, Slate Matheson was an old-fashioned man.

Into this situation had come Napoleon Price, bearer of golden dreams, and C.J. had thought she could get the money they

needed by singing professionally as she'd always wanted to. With their wedding plans already made, Slate had given his ultimatum. And the rest was history. Miserable history, C.J. thought.

The street's yellow dividing line glared mockingly at C.J., symbolically reminding her that there was a thin line between love and hate. It was a line Slate had crossed.

"What was she like?" The question was one C.J. had wanted to ask for so long that she didn't even clarify who *she* was. Neither did Barbara need it spelled out that her friend was asking about Slate's ex-wife.

"Jennifer wasn't from around here," she said, smoothly turning the car onto Bogan Lane, at the end of which the country club nestled in the night. "She's from somewhere in Arkansas. I'm not sure how they met—mutual friends maybe—but they married quickly. She's very pretty," Barbara added. "She has long blond hair just like yours." The two women exchanged glances.

"So what happened to their marriage?" C.J. forced herself to ask.

Barbara shook her head. "I don't really know, but whatever it was happened soon afterward. She must have gotten pregnant right away, and three, four months after Becca was born she split."

"Without her daughter?" C.J. asked disbelievingly.

"It was a messy divorce. Rumor has it that she demanded an unreal settlement and that Slate mortgaged the mill to give it to her. The only way Slate would agree, though, was if he got custody of the child."

"And she went for that?"

"Obviously." Barbara waded tentatively into deeper waters. "I'm not sure she knew how to deal with Becca." At the curious look clouding C.J.'s face, she added, "Becca has a heart problem. She had

rheumatic fever when she was just a little thing. It damaged a heart valve."

The two women sat silent and still.

"Oh, Barb, how do we get our lives so screwed up?"

Barbara hesitated, then said pensively, "I guess most of it we bring on ourselves." The women looked at each other, the brunette finally adding, "If you want to know what I think, I don't think he's ever gotten over you. And I think you should fight for him."

At this C.J. laughed, a lonely sound mocking the tranquil southern night. "Believe me, Barb, he's over me. Good and over me."

Seconds later, as the women were walking toward the country club, C.J. played back the thought. Slate was good and over her, with a capital G and a capital O, which was what she had to do: go on with her life.

Her mood improved. But then, how could it not, when everyone at the club seemed intent on having a good time and equally intent on her sharing in the gaiety? New friends were quickly made and old friendships warmly renewed.

While C.J. was comfortable with most of the harmless flirting going on around her, she couldn't say the same for Ace Phillips's—either that she was comfortable or that his flirting was harmless. He had been stuck at her side almost since the moment she'd arrived.

Though he was an old friend—or rather, an old acquaintance—she found his looks just a little too lingering, his touch on her arm just a little too intimate, and the way he spoke just too low and familiar. At the first opportunity, she politely excused herself and moved on. She was thankful that he didn't follow.

Someone pressed a drink into her hand—a pina colada, she thought; too sweet, she knew. Wandering among the

small groups of men and women filling the wood-paneled clubhouse, she sipped and smiled.

A massive chest, hidden within a green shirt and beige sports coat, loomed before her so unexpectedly that she had no choice but to plow right into it. Strong hands grabbed her upper arms to steady her.

"Sorry," the male voice declared in a rich, appealing bass.

"No, it was my fault—" The words faded into an awkward nothingness as C.J. glanced up into brilliantly lit green eyes. Her first thought was that this town wasn't big enough; the second, that she'd never seen eyes quite as beautiful, quite as compelling, and that her memories, even as freshly made as that afternoon, did not do them justice.

"Aren't you a little overdressed, teach?" Slate drawled. "Trying to impress us country bumpkins with your sexy big-city glamour?"

"No, Slate," she heard herself answering, "I wore the dress because it was all I had."

With that, she moved to step past him. Strong fingers again curled about one arm and turned her around. Eyes once more collided. Hers looked wounded, his sober and apologetic.

"I... I'm sorry," he whispered.

"No, you're not," she replied as she pulled her arm from his grasp. "You're not one bit sorry."

She walked away, her spine straight with dignity, and disappeared into the crowd. Within seconds, someone had put another drink into her hand. She downed a third of it in the first swallow. She had no idea whether it was too sweet or too sour and really didn't care. All she wanted was for its fire to burn away the memory of Slate's hatred.

Axiom has it that when you're down

you get the swiftest kick. C.J. had just walked away from Slate and was having a miserable one-sided conversation with an old school friend when the band launched into a song.

C.J. froze, her heart tumbling to her feet. Slate, too, stopped abruptly, his eyes unerringly finding hers above the heads of the room's occupants and through the acrid gray mist of cigarette smoke.

No! C.J. protested as her eyes merged with his. Please, dear God, don't let it be *that* song. Not *their* song, "Winter Heart." Please don't let it be the song she'd closed every show with for ten years because it had been her only remaining link to the man she'd loved. Her prayer went unanswered, and the slow, haunting melody filled the room. Couples ambled from the sidelines to the dance floor, embraces became intimate, and still C.J. and Slate watched each other. Neither moved.

And then he was walking toward her. With each step, the years slipped away for C.J. He was going to hold her. In seconds he'd reach for her, erasing with the warm fold of his arms the pain of lonely years. She took one step . . . another . . . heading straight into his arms.

Arms that never arrived.

His eyes on C.J., he stopped before a brunette C.J. had never seen before. She was the woman he pulled into his arms.

C.J. watched in numb disbelief. Hurt and embarrassment clawed at her tender senses. Her heart turned over in her chest as Slate settled the woman into a close, familiar embrace that indicated they'd danced together before.

Unable to witness another second of the scene before her, C.J. started plowing through the dancers, her goal simply to exit the room. Halfway to the door, Ace Phillips stopped her.

"C'mon, C.J., let's dance," he slurred.

Though she felt her heart had been rip-

ped out, she tried to be polite. She smiled weakly. "No, thanks. Another time."

"Naw, c'mon," he insisted. "I've been watching you all evening. Let's dance. Let's—"

"Please," C.J. pleaded, attempting to pull free from the hand shackling her arm.

"I don't think the lady wants to dance, Phillips," came a low, silk-smooth voice at C.J.'s shoulder. Slate looked calm but tightly coiled. "Why don't you just let her go?"

The two men sized up each other. Slowly Ace Phillips eased his hold on C.J. and gave his full attention to Slate. "And why don't you just mind your own damn business? What is it, Matheson, you still got the hots for her?"

The man never saw the blow coming. It was one quick burst of energy, fist to chin, and Ace Phillips was sprawled flat out on the floor.

The band stopped. Two women screamed.

C.J.'s eyes, which were wide, flew to Slate's, which were narrowed. She read there, in green accusation, that Slate viewed the whole tawdry scene as her fault. Her fault because she'd had the audacity to come home.

That realization was the final blow in an otherwise lousy day. With a hard-fought-for composure, she walked through the gaping crowd and out into the friendly oblivion of the night.

Later in her apartment, C.J. sat huddled, clutching her T-shirt to her, her knees to her chin, in the middle of the sofa bed. She absently noted its exhausted brown and beige herringbone pattern spread with freshly laundered sheets, but the forefront of her mind was on the scene that had played out at the country club two hours before. She glanced at the white plastic clock on the glass-ringed end table. Two minutes until straight up and

down midnight.

Her eyes traveled to the room's only concession to color and willed the fire-engine-red phone to ring. It didn't, and she cursed the frustrating sound of silence. And her stupid expectations.

Why she wanted him to call eluded her. No, that wasn't true, she mused. She knew why. She had this overwhelming need to hear his voice, warm and caring, the way it had once been.

She stood and walked to the phone, her heart pounding. Well, she decided, I'll have to just take matters into my own hands.

Only after the phone started ringing did C.J. realize that Slate might not be alone. He might be curled in the arms of the brunette. The thought hurt. It also pointed out in the brightest of neon the inanity of what she was doing. She was just wrenching the receiver from her ear when she heard Slate's voice. Slate's angry voice.

"Hello?"

"Slate?" It was a wisp of sound borne heavenward on the wings of hope.

"What do you want?" Concern withered; anger again sprouted.

To die. This moment. "I... I called to see if you were all right."

"I'm fine."

"Your hand—"

He cut her off, absently opening and closing the hand even as he spoke. "It's all right."

"What about Ace Phillips?"

A sarcastic gust of air flowed over the phone line. "Save your concern. The horny creep got what he deserved."

C.J. pushed back the hair from her eyes. "That's all... I mean, that's all I called about. To see if you were all right. And to say how sorry I—"

"I shouldn't have said that about your dress."

His apology took her by surprise. "You

were right. I was overdressed."

"You looked... you looked beautiful." He had meant to say *fine*, but *beautiful* had escaped instead.

"Slate..." she whispered. Prayer. Plea. Abject apology.

His fingers clenched the receiver until the blood ceased to flow.

"Don't..." he whispered. Prayer. Plea. Abject misery.

There were so many things she would have said, but so few things she sensed he wanted to hear.

"Leave me alone, C.J.," he said in a voice low, tired, and devoid of the anger he'd hurled at her all day. Curiously, she now realized she preferred the anger.

Her nose stung, her eyes watered, her breath almost failed her.

"Sure," she said, her heart feeling on the edge of explosion. "I can do that, Slate."

With nerveless fingers, she slid the phone back into the cradle.

Over two weeks passed. In that time, Slate became the closest thing to a legend that Coughatta had ever had. As in the case of all legends, fact tended to blend with fantasy, but everyone agreed that, no matter how you sliced it, Slate Matheson was seeing a heap of women.

C.J. tried to ignore the gossip—if that's what it was—but it wasn't easy, especially since she saw Becca nearly every day at school. On Monday of the third week, she was walking down the aisles of the Piggly Wiggly after a long, hard day. She had just stretched toward a can of vegetable soup when she felt a tug on her camel-colored skirt. Her gaze shot downward.

"Becca!" she cried, abandoning the soup and stooping. "Hi."

It had been three hours since school let out, and Becca still wore the pink dress and the same angelic smile.

"Me and Daddy are shopping," the

child announced.

C.J. instantly glanced up and down the aisle. At that moment Slate whisked his cart around the corner into the aisle. His head was lowered over the list in his hand.

With a pencil stub in his hand, he scratched something off the list, reached into his cart to right a plastic jug of bleach that had fallen to its side, and looked up. He froze. The sight of C.J. fire-dazzled his brain, searing it with images of gilded curls splashing down her back, a tailored white blouse and beige skirt that fit like a million bucks, and silky stockings that encased curvy legs in such a way that, had looks been money, C.J. could have bought the world. With Slate thrown in.

"It's Miss A'zander," Becca pointed out as he approached them.

"Hello," Slate offered.

"Hello," C.J. counteroffered, relieved that civility was going to rule.

"Are we going to have cookies for supper?" Becca asked.

"Maybe," Slate answered, his eyes never leaving C.J.'s.

"Can Miss A'zander come to supper?"

Two pairs of eyes flew to Becca, then glanced toward each other.

"No, I—"

"Becca, we—"

"Please!" wailed the child.

"Becca," Slate chided gently, "C.J.—Miss Alexander probably has plans. And I have a date."

Something that had been stretched nerve-screamingly taut with the frustration of the last weeks snapped inside C.J. Not only was he going out—and Lord knew that was bad enough!—but he was standing before her flaunting the fact. Her impulse was to strike back.

"How nice," she replied in a voice crystallized with gooey sweetness. "Especially since you've scarcely been out in two weeks. You have just a simple little evening planned with the Dallas Cowboys

Cheerleaders?"

Slate's eyes widened slightly. "So I've dated a few women. So what?"

"A few? Entire small countries are populated by fewer people. If you want to know what I think—"

"I don't," he interrupted.

She ignored his interruption. "I think you're trying to hurt me." In her distracted, agitated state, she reached behind her and zapped up a jar of sauce, which she practically threw into the grocery cart.

Slate made a sound that combined a laugh and a snort. "Don't flatter yourself." Reaching out, he, too, grabbed something from the shelf and tossed it into his buggy. "If you want to know what I think—"

"I don't."

"I think you're jealous."

C.J. snorted. "Jealous?" she asked, as if he'd just made the most preposterous of suggestions. Without even looking she tossed something into her buggy.

"Are you fighting?" Becca asked. C.J.'s eyes met Slate's. "Nancy's mommy and daddy fight." Nancy was a friend and neighbor.

"We're not fighting," C.J. hastened to deny.

"We're not your mommy and daddy," Slate added. "I mean, I *am* your daddy, but C.J.'s—Miss Alexander's—not your mommy."

The words were sobering to both Slate and C.J. Time ceased its orderly passage.

"If you'll excuse me," C.J. whispered, stepping away. "I have some shopping to do. And I believe you have a date."

Was he holding her? Was he kissing her? Was he slowly undressing her in teasing ways that only Slate knew?

C.J. groaned, slung back the rumpled covers, and threw her legs over the side of the sofa bed. Stretching, she clicked on

the lamp, sending golden drops of light raining about the dark room.

She had spent the evening in hell. A hell that seemed to burn hotter by the moment. Why did she have to love him still? Why couldn't she despise him as he despised her? But even though he despised her, she knew he desired her.

Well, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to fight for him?

Was she? Could she? Did she have that kind of strength? Did she have the courage to try and fail? Because there was always the possibility, the very real possibility, that Slate truly didn't want her in his life. And yet. . .

She reached for the phone, dialed the number quickly before she could change her mind, and impatiently awaited an answer.

"Hello?" a feminine voice mumbled.

"Are you asleep?"

"Not anymore," Barbara Spelling announced grumpily.

"Look...uh...how do you feel about throwing a party?"

"A party? You woke me up to ask me that?"

"Yes." Something in her delivery of the one word must have alerted her friend to the subject's seriousness.

There was a brief pause. "What kind of party?"

"The kind we used to have in college."

"The kind where I invite Slate?" Barbara supplied.

There was another pause. "Yes."

"Well, well," Barbara said, speaking around an obvious grin and a yawn, "I think I hear the fighter climbing into the ring!"

Exactly a week later, C.J. approached her friend's door with damp palms and guarded expectations, cursing herself as an idiot for ever having concocted this party scheme. It was ridiculous. It was

stupid. And as she heard the sounds of revelry coming from within, she admitted it was also too late to back down.

She wanted to run. Instead, she rang the doorbell.

When Barbara answered, C.J. knew immediately from her friend's pinched expression that something was wrong.

"He brought a date," Barbara said without preface.

Every muscle in C.J.'s body seemed to atrophy into numbness.

"I'm sorry," Barbara said, an apologetic warmth in her brown eyes. "He showed up with her. What could I do?"

"Nothing...nothing," C.J. assured her. "It's all right, Barb. It was a stupid idea anyway."

The crowd began to part for them as they entered, and Barbara whispered to C.J. as they approached Slate and his date, "You might want to prepare yourself. His date is nice, physically perfect, and a Rhodes Scholar." Barbara straightened, smiled, and said in the most charming of socially correct voices, "Kelly, I'd like you to meet C.J. Alexander. C.J., this is Kelly Daniels, a friend of Slate's."

C.J. had thought she'd have trouble keeping her eyes on the woman and off Slate, who stood aside, just in C.J.'s peripheral vision. She shouldn't have worried. The woman's looks demanded her full attention. Kelly Daniels was tall, almost as tall as Slate. But then, why wouldn't she be tall? She was all legs—all beautiful long legs—and what wasn't devoted to legs was sculpted into the fullest, the ripest, the ohmygoddest figure C.J. had ever seen. Her brown eyes sparkled with intelligence and held just that hint of vulnerability that made knights don suits of armor. Her hair was the fiery auburn of a wild October forest. The bottom line was, Kelly Daniels was

perfect. A man's dream. A woman's nightmare.

The nightmare dream smiled and extended her hand. "Hi. Nice to meet you."

"Hello," C.J. returned, forcing a smile.

"And you know Slate," Barbara added unnecessarily.

C.J.'s eyes coasted to the man beside the beautiful woman. He wore khaki pants, a yellow plain shirt, a khaki sports coat, and an expression that said he was at ease.

"Hello," C.J. said, proud of the strength and normalcy of her voice.

"Hello," Slate returned, proud that he'd stifled the urge to touch her.

With just a hint of exasperated disquiet Barbara said, "The bar's set up in the kitchen." She nudged C.J. in that direction. "Oh, and, Slate," she added, taking Kelly's drink and handing it to him, "why don't you refill Kelly's glass?"

Kelly Daniels smiled, white teeth flashing, brushed Slate's arm with her fingertips, and said, "Thanks."

C.J. wasn't certain whether she was reeling more from Barbara's obviousness or from Kelly's casually possessive gesture toward Slate. At any rate, she definitely wanted the drink Barbara offered—maybe several of them—definitely didn't want to be alone in the kitchen with Slate, and just as definitely wanted to be home. In fact, she would have settled for anywhere Slate wasn't.

The kitchen seemed very empty, a world that contained only two awkward people trying hard not to act awkward.

Neither spoke; neither looked at the other. Slate worked over a bottle of amaretto and then popped open a bottle of beer he'd pulled from an ice-filled washtub. C.J. hastily poured Chablis into a tulip-shaped glass.

"Barbara was just a little bit obvious, don't you think?" Slate drawled at last.

His voice in the silent room sounded like a gentle rumbling of thunder.

C.J. glanced up. One part of her brain scribbled the notation that he looked wonderful; a second wrote back that he was with another woman. "I'd say she was more than a little obvious."

"I'm not sure what she expected us to do in here."

"Her expectations aside," C.J. replied, meeting his eyes fully, "I suspect the only thing we'll do is argue."

He gave a look that said he admired her honesty. "You don't think we can be with each other without arguing?"

"No," she answered bluntly.

He lifted the beer bottle to his mouth and took a long swallow. "I think you're right, Carly Jean," he said finally.

Carly Jean. He, like the rest of the world, seldom used her real name, but when he did it was always at those moments when emotions were running high.

"Why did you bring her?" She hadn't wanted to ask—she had promised herself she wouldn't—but her woman's heart had to know or break. And then maybe break because she knew.

His reply came swiftly and with an honesty that surprised him. "To hurt you."

The answer washed over C.J. like a chill wave.

"Congratulations," C.J. whispered around the lump in her throat. "You succeeded."

Slate opened his mouth, but his words were stillborn. Some emotion, deep and painful, darkened his eyes to shadowed jade. C.J. turned away and walked from the kitchen.

From there, the evening tumbled steadily downhill.

She would never be quite sure, C.J. thought two hours later, just how she had

endured the rest of the party or made it home, but she had. The apartment suddenly seemed unbearably small and lonely. After a torrent of tears, C.J. promised herself that there would be no more and threw herself into showering, putting on the white satin robe Price had given her for her birthday, and turning the sofa into a bed. That accomplished, she walked to the kitchen area for a cup of instant coffee, but she made it only halfway there before one loud, pounding knock nearly shattered the door.

In a daze she crossed the room, fumbled with the lock, and finally opened the door. In that moment of truth, in that moment of hope, she stood face to face with Slate. His eyes were shadowed with an indecipherable emotion, and when he spoke, his voice was raw and ragged.

"Damn you," he whispered.

Without invitation, he stepped into the room and with a quick flick of his wrist slammed the door so hard that the Dollar Store lamp rattled on the end table. The cheap glove-shaped glass was still tinkling when Slate pinned C.J. against the door. Neither spoke. Neither moved. and their uneven breaths filled the room like vapory entities trying to communicate but failing because there was no common language.

Slowly, perhaps because she peered so deeply and willed it so fervently, the unreadable emotions swimming in the depths of Slate's shadowed eyes began to surface into feelings C.J. could recognize. She saw anger. At her. At himself. She saw desire and a dawning recognition of inevitability.

"I told myself all the way to her house that I was going to take her to bed," he said in a flat tone. The identity of "her" was obvious, and C.J. felt as if a rusted arrow had been shot through her heart. "I tried," he said. "I really tried, but when I kissed her, I kept waiting for her lips to taste like—" He stopped, as if someone

had stolen his ability to speak.

"To taste like what?" she whispered.

"Like yours. What is this hold you have on me?" He was the conquered, the vanquished, the mystified captive held by the invisible but all-restraining bonds of his she captor.

"Do I have a hold on you?" she breathed, hope igniting in her heart like dry kindling in the first spark of fire.

"Yes." He swallowed, his breath coming in jagged, staccato bursts. When he spoke again, his voice was low and pleading. "Let me go. I want to be free of you. I want..." He stopped.

"What is it you want, Slate?" she asked, her words echoing off his nearness.

With a defeated groan, his head lowered and his lips crushed hers. The force the back of her head against the door. She whimpered and reached out for an anchoring handful of his shirt.

His kiss was the wonderfully sensual kiss C.J. had tucked into her memories so very long ago. It was the kiss she'd relived a thousand times in the dark of night and the lonely light of day. Slate led her to the sofabet by instinct and laid her down, undressing her.

His mouth widened over hers again, slowly, sensually, stealing her sanity, stroking her senses—until she felt wonderfully lost inside him. He circled, he grazed, he eased back onto her mouth, always nibbling, always widening, always erotically tonguing, almost eating her whole.

Fierce sensations stormed through her body, leaving in their wake a desire so elemental that she would easily have believed she was the first woman on earth, alive and burning for the first man.

"No man," she whispered against his mouth, "kisses like you, Slate Matheson."

"And no woman talks while she kisses, except you, Carly Alexander," he whispered back.

She giggled.

"Or giggles," he threw in with his own smile.

C.J.'s hands slipped beneath the folds of Slate's shirt and found the hard, matted wall of his chest. Her fingers luxuriated in the downy sea of black curls, the unyielding canvas of muscle. With bold eagerness, she slid the shirt off his wide shoulders. Hands spread across his muscle-ridged back, she pulled him down to her, meshing their bodies in a union of perfection. The union of fair day and dark night.

"You're exquisite," he whispered as he rid himself of the rest of his clothes.

"So are you," she whispered, purposely, provocatively nudging her thigh against him.

"You're also asking for it."

"Yes," she admitted bluntly.

The past slipped away, taking with it the hurt, the pain, the misery, leaving behind nothing but the moment, the exquisite moment of man and woman loving and sharing and not caring about the rest of the world. His body questioned, hers answered, until it was impossible to know the answer from the question. Together they surged toward one goal: completion.

Sometime later, in the middle of the night, Slate slipped from her bed, after making her promise, half-asleep, that she would come to his house the next evening to have dinner with him and Becca. "Becca will be staying the night with my mother," he whispered seductively, and CJ nodded happily before falling back to sleep, full of dreams of him.

"This is my room," Becca announced proudly, as she pulled C.J. down the hallway the next evening. As mistress of the recently renovated two-story white house, she had shown her guest—who had now become C.J. instead of the more

formal Miss A'zander, though Slate had made it clear she could call her C.J. only outside the classroom—through every downstairs room and had then hauled her up the stairs to the second floor.

Through it all, C.J. was keenly aware of the man lounging in the doorway. But then, she'd been keenly aware of him ever since he'd picked her up.

Finally Slate levered away from the door frame as they passed. "Is she wearing you out?"

C.J. smiled. "No. I'm loving it."

"I'll give you another five minutes before rescuing you."

The thought of Slate rescuing her from anything did jellylike things to C.J.'s legs, things she was certain showed in her eyes. She was glad when Becca once more dragged her down the hall.

"This is Daddy's room," she said, stepping into the master bedroom. Nutmeg and gold striped the walls and accented carpet and fabric, making the room a subtle blend of cozy and decorator-correct. It was also wonderfully lived in, as attested to by an unhung shirt and a forgotten beer can.

"Did you decorate it yourself?" C.J. asked, looking over her shoulder at Slate, who was tucking the beer can into a wastebasket. He then wadded up the shirt, opened the closet door, and threw it in. C.J. fought a smile.

"Yeah. But I wasn't too sure about the wallpaper."

"It works great."

Becca turned loose C.J.'s hand and sped across the room to plop on the king-sized bed. "Guess what? Daddy sleeps here."

"He does?" C.J. asked, refusing to look anywhere near Slate. The innocent remark had conjured up all kinds of breath-disturbing visions.

"Yes, and you could sleep here too," she announced wistfully.

Slate and C.J. exchanged looks. Despite everything they'd shared, both blushed. "I don't think so, muffin," he said. "Only mommies and daddies sleep together."

"She could be a mommy," Becca insisted in angelic innocence.

"Why don't you pack your suitcase to go to Nana's later," Slate told his daughter, though his eyes were on C.J.

"Nooo," Becca said, "I want to show C.J. my—"

"Go pack, princess," he interrupted, lowering his gaze to Becca. At the protest obviously forming, he added, "Now."

She whined but scooted from the bed. At the door, she hesitated. "Is C.J. going to stay?"

Slate nodded. "She'll be here when you get your suitcase packed. She's staying for dinner, remember?"

"I'll be here," C.J. repeated.

On that promise, Becca left.

C.J.'s questioning eyes had already found Slate's. He rammed a hand into a pants pocket, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"She, uh...she was afraid you wouldn't come today. She's a little insecure about the women in her life. I guess it comes from never seeing her mother."

"Never?"

"No. That's the way Jennifer wants it." Neither spoke for long, pondering moments. "Well," he said suddenly, brightly bright, "you ready to eat?"

"Yeah," she answered, sensing she'd learned all she was going to for now about Slate's marriage and the guilt he so obviously carried around.

They were alone—and overly conscious of that fact.

C.J. stood looking out the living room window, nervously nibbling her bottom lip, her moist hands in the pockets of her blue skirt. Vaguely she realized that the

night was threatening rain, that cloud tendrils had stolen the platinum brightness of the moon, and that the unnaturally still trees in the yard seemed to be holding their breath in anticipation. The whole world seemed poised on a precipice — waiting, waiting, just as she was waiting.

Behind her, she heard Slate closing the front door, heard his mother Myra's car come to life, and saw its yellow lights pull out of the drive and creep down the country road, leaving her and Slate alone.

C.J. heard him approaching and turned. Their eyes met.

"Becca said to tell you good night."

C.J. smiled in acknowledgment.

"She didn't want to go," Slate said. "It's the first time I ever remember her not wanting to go to Nana's house."

"I'm flattered," C.J. said. "If I was the reason."

"You were the sole reason."

Both hearts reacted to the admission. C.J.'s swelled with pleasure that Becca cared enough about her to want to stay, while Slate's experienced a prick of unease at the loss he might be setting his daughter up for.

Slate kissed her thoroughly, with the misery of three long hours of seeing without being able to touch. Her hand fluttered upward to grasp the arm so near her cheek. Fingers encircling it, she nestled her palm into thick dark swirls of hair and slid fingertips beneath the rolled-up sleeve. Finally he whispered her name and buried his face in her hair. They just held each other.

"Does my hair...does it remind you of your...wife's?" The question was out, spoken against his shoulder, before she could stop it.

She felt his body tense before he pulled back to stare into her eyes. Suddenly, he released her and, raking a hand through his hair, gave a rough laugh.

Confusion washed over her. "Did I say

something funny?"

"If you only knew," he said cryptically. He saw the hurt in her eyes: "No, C.J., your hair does not remind me of Jennifer's." He paused, and when he spoke again his voice was low and filled with an emotion C.J. couldn't identify. "Hers reminded me of yours."

They stared at each other, C.J. trying to understand what he'd just said, Slate feeling as if he were standing emotionally naked. Abruptly he turned, walked to the liquor cabinet, and poured himself a drink.

"You want one?" he called over his shoulder.

"No," she answered absently, preparing to ask what she'd wanted to ask for so long. "Why did you marry her, Slate?"

"Because she had blond hair and blue eyes," he said quietly. "And because when she stood on the far side of a room or lay in the shadowy glow of lamplight, I could pretend she was you."

The words robbed C.J. of all breath.

Slate raked his hand back through his midnight-black hair and heaved an agonized sigh. "I didn't realize that when I married her, though. I wasn't that callous a bastard."

"I think I will have that drink," C.J. said.

He studied her a moment before pouring a bourbon and water. When he handed it to her, their fingers brushed. Both felt fire.

"Talk to me, Slate," she said after sipping at the drink. "Help me to understand."

He walked to the window and, one hand in a pocket, stood looking blindly into the night. Finally he garnered the necessary courage to speak. "Friends introduced us, and we married within six weeks. I thought I loved her. I honestly thought I did.

"But everything went wrong right from

the first," he added hollowly. "Something inside me just didn't feel right. When I held her, when I made love to her... I don't know, it seemed like my body talking, not my heart."

"Barbara said she got pregnant right away." C.J. made the comment around a knot that had lodged itself in her throat.

Slate turned and ran a hand along the back of his neck. "We hadn't planned it. We wanted children—it was one of the reasons I wanted to settle down—but it happened sooner than we expected. Hell, I've even wondered if she unconsciously set it up, thinking that a baby would solve our problems."

"It didn't?"

"No. Although we both pretended for a while during the pregnancy. I tried, C.J. God, I tried. And she did, too. But..." The look he gave her was that of a man who'd been hurt, a man who was still hurting.

"But what?"

"There was always a part of me I never gave her, that I could never give her. I said all the right words, I made all the right moves, and yet she and I both knew they sounded hollow and felt shallow." His eyes locked with C.J.'s as if remembering the special past the two of them had shared. "Everything came to a head one autumn afternoon. I was watching a football game, and because she was bored, she went upstairs to straighten out some drawers. She, uh... found something she hadn't bargained for."

C.J. waited but was finally forced to ask, "What?"

Slate swallowed and replied in a near whisper, "She found a picture of another blond, blue-eyed woman... and an engagement and wedding ring."

The room grew so quiet that the storm-stillness outside was almost audible.

"She, uh... she confronted me with what she'd found... and with what she

thought our problem was. She said I'd never really been married to her at all, that I'd been trying to marry the woman in the picture." Slate's eyes bore deeply into the azure of those watching him so intently. "I couldn't deny it," he admitted. "In fact, the moment I heard it, I was certain of its truth.

"We stayed together until after Becca was born, but I never touched her again. And it wasn't because of the advanced pregnancy. She didn't want me to touch her, in any way, and I didn't want to. We sort of moved about in a mist, neither one of us willing to make the decision to leave. Then Becca got sick—rheumatic fever—and when she recovered, Jennifer asked for a divorce."

"And you asked for Becca."

"I demanded Becca." He gave a harsh laugh. "Which was unnecessary. As it turned out, Jennifer wanted no part of her."

"How can that be?" C.J. asked incredulously.

Slate's eyes again met hers fully. "She said Becca wasn't her daughter."

"Wasn't her daughter?"

"She said in some freak accident of nature she'd borne another woman's child. She said Becca was really... yours. The child I'd wanted to have with you."

C.J. eased herself down onto the arm of the sofa. "Oh, my God," she whispered. She put the glass to her lips and drank. When she finished, Slate took the glass from her hands and killed the remainder of the numbing bourbon and water.

"She was right," Slate said as the drink burned its way down. "Becca's our child. Yours and mine. Right down to the black hair and blue eyes we hoped for."

C.J. felt the sting of tears and closed her eyes. Then she rose and stepped toward him and reached out to touch his arm.

"Oh, Slate," she whispered.

At the softness of her caress, he raised anguished eyes to her. Time stopped... and slipped through the realm of reality to become yesteryear. He was the old Slate, she the old C.J., both so much in love that neither knew quite how to express it. Her hand traveled up his arm, her fingers entwining with his. For long moments; they just stared at their joined hands.

The truth settled about them, cloaking them in the sadness of their star-crossed lives.

"Games. We played guessing games with our lives, Slate. Games we both lost."

"Stay with me tonight," he whispered against her ear. "Let me love you."

C.J. pulled back to stare into his face, his oh-so-handsome face. "No more game-playing," she pleaded.

"No more," he whispered just before his lips crushed hers.

After making arrangements to spend Easter together, they both spent a busy week, with only a few, furtive visits and many long, intimate phone conversations sandwiched in their hectic schedules. Finally, Easter arrived.

"Is she too heavy?"

C.J. looked down at the child sleeping in her lap.

"No," she said, pushing a tendril of ebony hair back from the delicate cheek.

"We could put her in the back," he offered, indicating the back seat of the station wagon they'd opted to drive instead of the more confining jeep.

"Let me hold her," C.J. insisted.

Slate gazed happily at the way she looked holding his child before turning his attention back to the road. C.J. felt utterly content.

The day had been one of the happiest of her life. Dressed in their finery—for her

it was a new white linen dress; for Becca, a rose-colored frock with lace and matching bows for her hair; and for Slate, a neat gray suit—they had attended sunrise services at Hodges Gardens. They had then changed Becca into shorts and a top and trooped, all three would have sworn, over every inch of the 4,700 acres of the formal and informal gardens. Besides blankets of sunshine-painted daffodils and scarlet and blue anemones, they ate their picnic lunch of fried chicken. After dining, they hunted Easter eggs, fed the greedy ducks on the 225-acre lake, and finally spread out a blanket beneath white dogwood to take an afternoon nap. Becca, who had seemed inordinately tired, C.J. thought, did nap, while C.J. and Slate said things with their eyes that their lack of privacy prevented them from following through with. All in all, it was a glorious day.

"Tired?" The male voice she loved so much interrupted her memories.

She turned to catch a glimpse of green eyes watching her as Slate briefly glanced away from the road. "A little bit. Are you?"

"A little bit," he admitted.

"Becca seems tired, too," C.J. said, wondering also if the child looked a little pale or if it was just the effect of the gloaming chasing away the day.

"She should be. She played herself out." Suddenly sensing C.J.'s concern, he asked, "Why? You think something's wrong with her?"

"No, no," she hastened to answer, hating herself for projecting her concern onto Slate. She told herself she simply couldn't accept the perfection of the day and was determined to worry about something. "She's just tired."

Slate studied his daughter, reached out and touched her bent leg, then glanced back up to C.J. "She's sleeping okay."

"She's fine. We're all tired."

Becca stirred in C.J.'s arms and settled

back down to dreamland. Slate looked over at C.J., back to the road, then over again at her. He opened his mouth but closed it without saying a word. His hands tightened on the wheel. He forced himself to speak.

"Will you marry me?" The fractured tone of his voice indicated that, had he just stepped out into busy metropolitan traffic, he couldn't be more frightened.

C.J.'s eyes slashed through the night.

"What?"

"Will you marry me?"

His words penetrated her consciousness like sunshine filtering through a lace-curtained window, then settled in her heart with the warmth of molten gold. She tried to speak, but the one syllable wouldn't tumble from her suddenly trembling lips. Instead, tears began to tumble from her eyes.

"Don't cry," he pleaded, then asked in unconcealed agony, "Is that yes or no?"

"Yes," she managed to get out through her tears.

"This week?"

"Whenever you say."

"This week," he confirmed.

She smiled. "I love a decisive man."

They entered C.J.'s apartment at about eight o'clock. Slate placed a still-sleeping Becca on the sofa and pulled his fiancée into his arms.

"Tell me I'm not dreaming," he demanded as his lips whispered over hers.

"You're not dreaming," she answered, locking her hands behind his neck and returning his kiss. They had just settled in for prolonged lovers' rites when the phone rang.

"The damned phone," Slate said.

"Get it," she whispered, pulling from his arms and moving to get a blanket to put around Becca.

"Hello?" a disgruntled Slate asked.

There was a pause. "Is C.J. there?"

C.J. saw the tightening of Slate's hand, saw the stiffening of every muscle in his body, saw his face blanch.

"Who's calling, please?"

"Napoleon Price."

"Just a moment, Mr. Price."

Wordlessly, with his eyes locked on C.J., who had just straightened from covering Becca, he extended the telephone.

C.J. took it and tried to grab his hand, but he pulled away and walked toward the window. Fear had frozen every feature on his face, making him suddenly look older and so very vulnerable.

"Hi," she said brightly. Too brightly.

"I've got great news, hon," he announced, excitement creeping into his voice like a fog upriver on a still night. "Larry Fogherthy—"

"The record promoter?"

"Yes. He called last night. C.J., he's crazy about the demo of 'Winter Heart.' He wants to promote it. Can you believe it? This is a man who represents some of the biggest names in country music"—he gave a quick, impressive rundown—"and he wants to represent your record."

"He wants to represent the record?"

C.J. asked in disbelief.

"That's right. And he wants to back you on a tour."

"A tour?" she repeated.

"A ten-day tour of Nashville, Memphis, and Chattanooga. The money—Lord, C.J., you won't believe the money he's offering." He mentioned the sum. He had been right: C.J. didn't believe it.

"Why so much?" she asked, realizing the sum was more than she'd made all the year before.

"He's courting you," Price answered.

"He wants you to agree to more tours. And of course he'll get a cut." Price filled her in on all the details. "I've got you booked on a flight out of Shreveport on Wednesday—"

"I can't," C.J. interrupted.

Price hesitated. Slate turned, his eyes locking with hers as he approached, wrapping his arms around her.

"How about Thursday?"

"No," she said, smiling at the man she loved. "I'm getting married."

"Married?"

"Yes," she repeated. "Slate and I are getting married, the way we should have a long time ago."

"C.J. listen—" Price began.

"Wish us happiness," she broke in.

When her agent spoke again, his voice was rough with emotion. "You know I always wish you happiness. You're like my daughter, but, hon—"

"No buts," C.J. interrupted. "This is what I want."

"Think it over," he interrupted.

"Okay," she said, mostly because she wanted to get off the phone so she could be more tightly smothered in Slate's arms.

Slate relinquished his hold just enough for her to cradle the phone, then hauled her back against his body. He held her with a fierce possessiveness.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" he asked thickly.

"Positive."

Cradling her face in his hands, he stared down into her glittering blue eyes. "I swear you'll never regret your decision."

When his lips found hers seconds later, she knew she never would.

Over the next few days, plans for their wedding were quickly made. The ceremony was set for that Friday, with a small reception at Slate's mother's house. On Wednesday, C.J., glowing with happiness, drove to meet Slate at his office for a night of celebration.

As C.J. opened his office door, the hum of air conditioning greeted her. Slate was leaning against the edge of his clut-

tered desk, his broad back to her, a phone clutched to his ear.

"I don't give a damn how much time the survey takes," he said into the mouthpiece. "If we don't get some idea of how much damage the beetle has already done, we're going to be out of a helluva lot more time, to say nothing of money."

Slate motioned for her to come closer, then went back to the phone conversation and what was obviously a problem.

"Yeah, okay," he said into the phone, trying to get rid of the caller. "Keep in touch, huh? Yeah. Yeah, I will. You, too." He dropped the phone into its cradle and pulled C.J. into his arms, locking his hands at the small of her back. "What took you so long?" he growled, going for her neck.

"I'm early," she pointed out as frissons of feeling burst to life at the touch of his mouth on her skin.

"Impossible," he returned, his lips kissing the hollow of her throat and moving up to the tip of her chin.

Their lips had just made contact when the phone rang. Slate groaned. C.J. groaned. The phone rang again. With a sigh, Slate reached for it.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Matheson, your mother's on line one. She sounds upset."

He shoved down the button. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"It's Becca," Myra Matheson said, obviously trying to sound calm but not succeeding in the least.

Slate's eyes rushed to C.J.'s. "What's happened to her?"

"Oh, Slate, she fainted. She's conscious now, but she looks so pale." There was a brief pause before she added, "I think it's her heart."

Hospitals always smelled the same, C.J. thought as she and Slate walked

down the hushed halls of the medical center. An improbable blend of chemicals and hope, antiseptics and pain.

"The waiting room should be right around the corner," C.J. said hoping they'd correctly followed the instructions given them at the receiving desk. She was about to add that she would ask for further directions if need be, when she spotted Myra.

"How is she?" Slate asked.

"I don't know. She's still in emergency," Myra answered.

Time crawled. Nine o'clock came and went. Nine-thirty, nine forty-five. Myra went for coffee, saying she would go crazy if she didn't do something besides watch the clock. C.J. forced Slate to take a few swallows of the steaming liquid, but the cup soon stood forgotten. Ten o'clock saw Slate pacing the room. Ten-fifteen arrived on his anguished sigh, a sound that filled the room and C.J.'s heart. She pleaded with him to take it easy. He said that he was.

Three heads jerked up at the sound of advancing footsteps. Three hearts soared at the smile on the doctor's tired face.

"I think she's going to be all right," the green-robed man announced.

"Thank God." The world suddenly seemed to have been lifted from Slate's shoulders. He could actually breathe again. "What's wrong?"

"She has mitral stenosis."

"Mitral stenosis?" Slate repeated with the confusion of a layman.

"The mitral valve has calcified in a closed position, so we're going to have to go in and open it up," the doctor explained.

"Then she is going to need surgery?" Slate asked, worry once more scoring his features.

"Don't look so grim. It's a fairly simple procedure. I have the surgery scheduled for forty-eight hours from now. I wanted

to give her a chance to stabilize before subjecting her to more trauma."

"She's going to be all right?" Slate asked, needing more reassurance.

"Yes. I expect a complete recovery. Barring unforeseen complications and allowing some time for convalescence, of course."

Slate threaded his fingers back through his hair, this time in relief. "May I see her?" he asked.

"She's sedated. Why don't you get a good night's rest and—"

"May I see her?"

The doctor smiled indulgently. "As one father to another, yes. But only for five minutes." He looked over at Myra. "And then I'll give Grandmother her five minutes. And then it's rest for my patient and the three of you. Incidentally," the tall, lanky physician added, "my patient looks considerably better than you all."

Everyone grinned. That wonderful feeling of relief that comes so sweetly at crisis's end swept over them.

Slate dipped his head for a quick kiss as he passed by C.J. "I'll be back in a minute," he whispered.

When he was gone Myra gave a deep sigh, a sound C.J. thought at odds with the good news the doctor had just given them.

"I wish this hadn't happened," Myra said softly.

"I know, but it's going to have a happy ending. All the worrying about it is over. After the surgery, Becca's going to be a normal child with a normal future."

"Yes. And that's all that matters," Myra agreed. "But I'm worried about Slate. I don't know how much he's told you about his financial situation, but this surgery couldn't have come at a worse time."

"I don't understand. Surely his insurance..."

Myra shook her head. "Have you ever

tried getting insurance for someone with a health problem? A potentially severe health problem?"

"Oh, no," C.J. whispered, feeling suddenly ill. "He has no insurance?"

"Some, but I think it's rampant with riders exempting Becca's problem. I don't know what he'll do," Myra added. "The man is so much like his father when it comes to stubborn pride, especially about money. He'll sell the mill before he lets the debt go unpaid, and without the mill..." Myra couldn't even finish.

But C.J. didn't really notice the uncompleted thought. She was too busy playing with a thought of her own. A wonderful thought of her own. But it was one she promised to keep to herself until after Becca's surgery. In the meantime, though, she'd just give Price a call.

"How is she?" C.J. asked the moment Slate walked back into the hospital waiting room the following Wednesday afternoon.

"She looks so small in that big bed," he said, his voice carrying the strain of having just seen his child almost immediately after surgery. "And there are tubes and machines everywhere." His lips slid into a weak smile. "But the doctor says she looks good, that she's fine." He hesitated, looking at her. "This isn't exactly the way we'd planned to spend the week, is it?"

"There'll be many more weeks in our life," C.J. smiled. Then slowly her smile drifted away. "Let me help you," she said, finally broaching the subject she'd kept on hold.

"You have helped me," he answered. "Just your being here—"

"No. I mean, let me help you with the money." She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Myra told me how hard it's been to insure Becca."

A cloud passed over Slate's newly

relaxed features. "I can pay my own bills." His tone was not harsh, yet it was chilled around the edges.

C.J. shivered in the coolness. "I thought the pronoun *my* had changed to *our*. I thought my bills were yours, your bills mine."

"How do you propose to help me?" Slate asked. "You said yourself that your career hadn't been lucrative."

C.J. swallowed, hoping to high heaven she could word this just right. "No, I don't have any money, but..."

He was staring at her so intently that she almost lost her nerve.

"...but I could get it." The enthusiasm she'd felt when the idea first occurred to her came flooding back. "Oh, Slate, all I'd have to do is agree to this tour Price called about. It would be for only ten days—Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga—and then I'd be back home. The money from the tour would pay for the surgery. If the demo did well, we could even pay off some of the mortgages and—"

"No!" Slate roared.

"I have this terrible sense of *deja vu*," she whispered.

"Funny, so do I," he replied crisply, without even glancing over his shoulder.

Minutes tripped by.

"What is it you object to, Slate?" she asked.

He rammed his hand into his pocket. "A man doesn't need a woman to help him pay his debts."

"Dammit! That's chauvinism at its worst," she hurled back, but instantly apologized. "I'm sorry. We've both been under a lot of strain."

He turned, and their eyes collided.

"Slate, don't you see—"

"All I know," Slate said with a huskiness to his voice that bespoke the emotions storming him, "is that if you walk out that door, you'll never come

back to me."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked.

"Yes. If you walk out that door, I don't want you to come back. Becca needs a full-time mother, and I need a full-time wife. Not someone who drops in every ten years to see how we're doing."

C.J.'s world collapsed, her dreams, her wishes, falling about her in unfulfilled chaos. A numbness, a merciful numbness, sprang to life in the region of her heart and spread to every fiber and cell. She took a symbolic step away from him, acknowledging an emotional chasm so deep and wide that she saw no hope of spanning it.

"You've been waiting all along for this, haven't you? You've just been waiting to pounce on anything you thought would prove that a career meant more to me than you do."

He said nothing, gave nothing away with his eyes.

"If you change your mind, I'll be in Tennessee. But this time you're going to have to come to me."

Slate's chest heaved, and he fought hard to keep the tears at bay. He failed, and they glassed his eyes. "I won't come," he said roughly.

She studied him. A slow, sad smile claimed her lips. "No, I don't think you will."

He didn't come.

But then, C.J. had known he wouldn't. Knowing, however, hadn't lessened the hurt when hours had bled into days, days into weeks, weeks into two long and lonely months.

She had finished the ten-day tour and then signed up for another, followed by yet another because she had nothing else to do, nowhere else to go, and nobody but her audience to share an evening with. She often marveled at how her career had

skyrocketed in two months, but never with anything but detachment. In fact, she now viewed all of life in a detached, uninvolved way. She no longer emotionally participated in it. It simply went on about her, while she existed only in a world of breathing and eating and sometimes sleeping. Except for one hour and ten minutes each night. It was then, on stage and before an audience, that C.J. Alexander lived.

And for fifteen minutes every Saturday morning, for it was then she called Myra and asked about the two people she cared most about.

"You want more coffee?" Price asked one Saturday morning in June as he and C.J. sat in a luxurious suite in one of Atlantic City's finest hotels. She was playing the hotel's prestigious lounge.

She glanced up from the morning paper, realizing as she did so that she hadn't been reading at all. She'd simply been staring at the printed page. Her mind had been on the phone call she'd made to Myra earlier that morning. It had not been a comfortable call. For the first time since leaving, she'd spoken to Becca, and the conversation had sliced at her heart. How did you explain to a child what you fully didn't understand yourself?

"C.J.?" Price repeated. "More coffee?"

She focused her mannequin eyes on the wrinkled face before her. "No. No, thanks."

"Since this is the last show of the tour," Price said, "ten to one someone will ask you to sing, 'Winter Heart.'"

Lackluster eyes abruptly sparked to life. "No!" she said emphatically. "I won't sing it."

Holding up a small bony hand, Price said, "Okay, hon. I'm not asking you to. I just wanted to warn you."

The wiry agent reached out and covered her hand with his. "I never

wanted success at the expense of your happiness."

She placed her other hand over his, sandwiching his hand between hers. "I know that. I was a fool. To think that I could recapture the past." She sighed. "You remember you said I couldn't go home again?"

He nodded.

"The sad truth is, you can. Nothing ever really changes."

He was on the edge. Slate knew he stood poised on that thin line between control and unrestrained lunacy. Too many sleepless nights, too many dreams when he did fall asleep, too many bittersweet memories had finally taken their emotionally lethal toll. He was coming apart, little by little by lot, and he didn't know how to stop the shredding process.

"Guess what." The words swirled about him as if coming from some great distance. "Daddy"—impatience had set in—"guess what."

Slate glanced down at his daughter, who was sprawled on her stomach on the floor of his mother's house. Becca was coloring, while Myra stood nearby.

"What, muffin?"

"I talked to C.J. She's going to send me a present. It's a surprise."

Slate's head pivoted toward his mother.

"She called to see how everyone was," Myra explained. "She calls every Saturday."

The news hit like the proverbial ton of bricks. "She does?"

"Uh-huh."

He waited, his breath bated, his heart shouting its beat, but nothing followed. He swore he wouldn't ask why she called every week, but he couldn't help asking, in a husky voice, "How is she?"

"Lousy, like you."

"I got a statement from the hospital

yesterday," he said after a while. "The bill's been paid." Seconds passed before he added, "I'll pay her back." The identity of *her* was obvious.

"I'm sure you will," Myra said in a tone that immediately lassoed her son's attention.

"What does that mean?"

Myra shrugged. "Simply what I said. I'm sure you will pay her back. You're that much like your father. There was no way he would ever let anyone help him. Certainly not in a matter involving money. You know, I've often thought that you embraced your father's religion of financial independence because you were trying to gain his approval. You figured that if you were like him, he'd have to love you."

Slate suddenly looked uncomfortable. Talking about his father was always unsettling.

"The truth was, he did love you. Very much. He was just a man who had trouble expressing himself." A wistful look crossed her face. "And he refused to let himself need anyone. That always hurt me. I knew he loved me, but a person—a woman—likes to feel needed."

"And you didn't?" Slate asked, sensing his mother's need to talk. It was the kind of intimate discussion they'd never shared.

"No," she said simply as the past crowded in. "When he was just starting the mill, times were rough. I wanted to take a job to help." She smiled sadly. "I even went out and found one. I was going to surprise him." The smile faded. "It was the only big fight we ever had. He refused to let me work. To this day, I feel cheated. How dare he take from me the right to help someone I loved? I could never convince him that giving of oneself nourishes one's soul and does wonderful things for the heart." Her eyes bore deeply into those of her son. "He wanted me in

his life, but he never really let me share life with him."

Slate studied the woman before him. "This is beginning to sound like a lecture."

"Mothers don't lecture. They impart wisdom." She sighed heavily as if just deciding to risk again her son's disapproval. "And while I'm imparting wisdom, I'll make one other observation."

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

"Because you're not." Her eyes softened, her tone lowered—she was a mother trying to lessen the blow of what she was about to say. "It's not really the money, is it, Slate? I mean, this thing with you and C.J. The money's part of it, but it's not the whole reason you two can't get together."

"What...what do you think the reason is?"

"I think you're afraid," she answered, pulling no punches. "I think you're afraid of coming in a poor second to C.J.'s career. Funny, isn't it, that as long as her career isn't a consideration, the two of you have no problems?"

"Are you afraid, Daddy?" Becca asked.

Slate glanced down at the child now sitting cross-legged on the floor. That moment of truth that everyone is faced with at least once in a lifetime crowded in on him. "Yes, I'm afraid."

Tears sprang to Myra Matheson's eyes. And she smiled her understanding and her comfort. "C'mon, Becca," she said, holding out her hand to her granddaughter. "It's nap time. And I think your daddy needs to be alone." She glanced back at Slate. "To find out just how brave he is."

"Where is she?" he asked when Myra finally walked back into the room a half

hour later.

"Atlantic City."

Slate looked over at his mother and asked, "What if it's too late?"

Myra Matheson smiled. "Ah, but what if it isn't?"

From backstage, C.J. saw the house-lights dim, heard the first notes of her opening songs, and felt a surge of adrenaline as her spirit tingled to life. In seconds she'd live again. In seconds she'd leave behind, for at least a brief interval, that cold black nothingness that had become her life.

The music swelled. The royal blue velvet curtain slowly parted. A masculine voice spoke distinctly and pleasantly. "Atlantic City's Diamond Lounge is proud to present for your evening's entertainment..."

A punishing rush of stage jitters seized C.J. Her stomach tightened until it actually began to quiver, and her breath seemed clogged in her chest. She told herself, as she had countless times, that she wasn't going to die and that her voice would be there when she needed it. She believed neither.

"...the talented, the versatile, the very lovely... C.J. Alexander!"

The music flared. The audience broke into applause. C.J. stepped forward onto the stage... and into life.

At her entrance, red and blue spotlights hit her, nearly blinding her, and at the same second the audience roared its welcome. There were cheers, shrill whistles, and enough warm vibrations to have the lounge immediately zoned as tropical. C.J. took the microphone the announcer handed her, waved and smiled at the audience, and picked up right on cue with the guitar, piano, and drums.

The song was fast-paced, an ice-breaker, and C.J. sang and swayed to the country lyrics proclaiming that her lover

was a devil with blue eyes and blue jeans. At the song's end, no one would have denied that the show was off to a rousing start.

The evening progressed as C.J. sang of Smoky Mountain rain, of hot whispers in the night, of a lady down on love. The audience loved her. And while she, too, was feeling her usual aliveness, it slowly began to dawn on her that she wasn't feeling as vividly alive as she had in the past. The realization frightened her. She covered her fear by performing more vigorously.

All too soon, C.J. started on the last song of the evening. As she did so, a man in the back of the lounge pulled something from his pocket. As the last two notes of the song died away, the same man pocketed the years-old engagement ring he'd just been staring at. He watched C.J. take her final bow.

"Sing 'Winter Heart'!" someone shouted. The request was followed by a dozen others.

C.J.'s stomach knotted, but she forced a smile to remain on her lips. "I'm sorry..."

"We came all the way from Texas!" shouted a man up front.

A dark panic seized her. She couldn't sing the song. She couldn't! She glanced at Price, her eyes begging him to do something. She saw him step forward just as she heard a new voice drifting from the back of the room.

"Sing it!" The voice was low and throaty and passionately demanding.

C.J. peered through the bright maze of lights. She saw only a shadow, a shadow that began to move slowly toward her. The shadow was broad-shouldered, lean, and walked with a familiarity that almost stopped her heart. She thought she was hallucinating.

"Sing it, Carly," the shadow repeated.

She swallowed hard and gripped the mike with a strength that threatened to

crush metal. At her right, she vaguely heard her backup musicians whispering among themselves, then heard the first notes of 'Winter Heart.'

The jean-clad figure moved forward—determinedly forward—weaving between tables, ignoring the blatant stares of the men and women about him.

Slate moved toward her like a man obsessed. Heads turned as he passed the tables; whispers sang their song of conjecture. Oblivious, he walked; just as C.J., likewise oblivious, watched the man's approach. The room waited with heavy expectation.

Her eyes riveted on the man, C.J. missed the intro of the song. The band started again. This time instinct took over, and C.J. grasped the cue and began to sing. Her voice was low, almost inaudible, and the words came slowly, falteringly.

As he broke through the glaring lights, the song died on C.J.'s lips. Ultimately, the band stopped, each instrument trailing off at a different rate. The noiselessness in the room transcended silence.

C.J. stared down into Slate's magnificent green eyes, eyes glassy and pleading, eyes that had known pain, eyes that were vulnerable with hope.

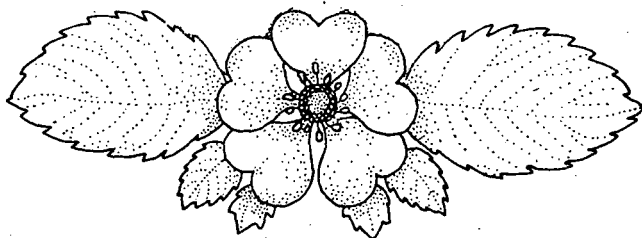
"Sing it," he commanded softly. "I love you. Sing it for me."

Her heart soared so high that it kissed the stars. Slowly, softly, her voice filled the room—and Slate's heart—with their song. Her eyes never leaving his, nor his straying from hers, she sang of a winter heart that she knew had finally thawed in the heat of the love she was offering. Slate listened to the words with a heart swollen and love-tender. When the song ended, Slate rushed up the steps—the security guard moved to stop him, but the bony hand of Napoleon Price prevented his doing so—and slipped an arm around C.J.'s waist. He crushed her to him, sequins to denim, woman to man, mate to mate. She clung with a desperation more driving than any she'd ever known. C.J. felt his body, hard and masculine, felt his moist tears on her cheek, felt his love. His jagged breathing filled her ear. Hers wafted in a warm vapor against his neck.

Pulling back, he stared into her eyes—green cherishing blue. "There's so many things I need to say to you," he whispered. "There's—"

Her fingertips splayed across his mouth, leaving on his lips the taste of love and understanding. "Take me home," she whispered.

His lips closed over hers, possessively, wetly, and with the sweet promise that he would, indeed, take her home—and with the sweeter promise that he'd never again let her out of his life. ♥



Spring Madness

Madcap deejay Meg Randall and serious-minded station owner Kyle Rager are an unlikely pair. But when an emergency makes them an impromptu team, they're an overnight success and the chemistry is sensational—on and off the air waves.

—AIMEE DUVAL—

Meg Randall gazed out the window at the desert mesa. The Magdalena Mountains could be seen in the distance, snow still covering their hazy blue crests. At least it was beautiful here, she thought. Good thing, since Cabezón, New Mexico, might become her next home. After all she had been through during the past few months, it would be poetic justice to end up in a town whose name, translated from Spanish, meant “hard-headed.”

She really needed to get a deejay job here

at KHAY. After she'd been fired from KSUN in Phoenix, none of the larger stations she had applied to had been willing to give her a chance. And all because of one irate advertising client!

Either Kyle Rager hadn't heard about the trouble, or he didn't care, because after listening to her demo tape, he had asked her to come in for an interview.

“Ms. Randall?” A deep masculine voice reverberated behind her. “I'm Kyle Rager. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

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She turned and stared at the devastatingly handsome man standing in the doorway. He perfectly fit her fantasy vision of a Nordic hero. Her own five-foot, ten-inch frame, which usually gave her the psychological advantage of never having to look up at anyone, failed her now. This man was at least six inches taller than she was. His powerful build and great size combined to create an impression of formidable virility.

He smiled, and his expression lit up with an enticing warmth. The effect was staggering.

"My name's Meg Randall," she blurted out. "Oh, but you already know that." She stared into the deep azure pools of his eyes. Was the light playing tricks or did they shimmer from jade to blue like translucent seawater?

"Won't you come into my office?" He touched her shoulder briefly, a simple gesture that caused her heart to race.

"I enjoyed your demo tape," he said.

She used all her willpower to break his mesmeric spell on her. "I'm glad."

He waved a casual invitation for her to take a seat, then continued to his desk. "You're very good." He eased himself into the giant brown swivel chair. "The only problem I have is that I'm not sure your style is conservative enough for our listeners." He held up a hand to halt her protest. "I checked around, and it seems you're the cause of a great deal of controversy."

That was putting it mildly. She sighed. What had made her think the attitude toward her being fired would be any different here? Clearly, if she wanted to continue her career, she'd have to win him over. "Would you like to hear my side of the story?" she asked.

"Sure. Let's have it."

"As you have undoubtedly discovered, I used to work for KSUN in Phoenix. During my program one day I was

scheduled to begin running a series of advertising spots for the Stairway to Heaven Crematorium. Their Stairway Plan offered differently priced steps toward a celestial reward. For the top of the line in cremation services the person's ashes would be flown anywhere in the world—except hostile countries—and scattered over the chosen site."

"How cheery," Kyle commented.

"I had been given instructions to run the ad four times every hour." She continued. "The whole idea made my skin crawl, to be honest, so when I ran the ad for the last time on my shift that night, I ad-libbed a bit, that's all."

He raised one eyebrow. "How?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I told the audience that for the budget-minded, Stairway to Heaven Crematorium offered a super-saver step. The loved one's ashes could be fused into a decorative paperweight with a brass nameplate that was guaranteed to add a touch of class to anyone's office."

Kyle laughed. "And since Stairway to Heaven Crematoriums are scattered throughout the Southwest, and advertised heavily over the radio, you've probably been blacklisted by every major station."

"That's it in a nutshell," she admitted.

"That might have been your worse faux pas on the air," he added, "but from what I hear, that's scarcely the whole story. What about the time you told your listeners that the man pressuring City Hall to remove thorny rosebushes from city parks deserved a pie in the face? You started an epidemic of pie 'hit' jobs. Public officials and unpopular citizens were afraid to step outside their homes. And then later, in December, you complained on the air that your station didn't have a Christmas tree. Before your shift ended, KSUN had received seventy-five trees."

"No harm was done," she insisted.

"We took them to hospitals and nursing homes. Lots of people benefited."

She was about to defend herself further when the music being piped into his office stopped abruptly. The disk jockey interrupted his broadcast to read a special bulletin: "This was just handed to me," he told the listeners. "We need all our volunteer fire fighters to report to their duty stations. Smoke and flames have been spotted coming from the top floor of the apartment building between Fourth Street and Valverde Road." There was a brief pause. Then the deejay exclaimed, "Hey, wait a minute! That's where I live!"

The static sounds of dead air followed. Kyle's eyes widened. "He couldn't have..."

At that instant the receptionist burst in to Kyle's office. "T.J. McKay just rushed past my desk. There's no one on the air!"

Kyle's jaw dropped, but he recovered quickly. Springing to his feet, he dashed to the door, then stopped abruptly. "What the hell am I doing? I haven't run a control booth in at least ten years!" His eyes focused on Meg. "But you have. Come on!"

She dashed after him down the hall. "Does that mean I'm hired?"

"For now."

Suddenly she had an advantage that she had no intention of letting slip past her. This was the first opportunity she'd had in months. "I don't want temporary employment," she said as they entered the booth.

"Don't push your luck," he replied, handing Meg a set of headphones. He pulled up a chair next to hers and slipped on another headset.

"Fine. If you don't want me full-time, then I'll leave and you can take over yourself." Her best chance was to force him to make a quick decision.

He clenched his jaw, and his left hand

curled into a tight fist. "We'll do this together, *as a team*," he stated. "And no crazy ad-libbing. Remember that."

"You've got it, boss." She smiled, trying to hide her nervousness and lighten the mood.

After switching on the microphone and adjusting her headset, she said, "Hi, there, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Meg Randall, your new deejay for this morning. T.J. McKay is out chasing the fire truck. Stay with me and we'll tour the skies of New Mexico's magic Land of Enchantment. Now, a selection I've chosen especially for you." She inserted a cassette tape from the program roster into the machine and turned off her mike. After adjusting the volume of music being piped into the booth, she winked at Kyle. "We're back on the air, boss."

He breathed a sigh of relief as the seconds ticked by. Then Meg said: "If I say something you don't like, feel free to jump right in. Here we go." As the song ended she switched on both of their headphones.

"I have with me in the booth, ladies and gentlemen, my new partner in crime. He insists he's here to keep me from getting out of hand. Say hello, Kyle."

"Don't get too attached to her, folks. This might be the shortest association in recorded history."

"You'd better be nice to me. If you make me mad, I'll pout, and that means I won't say a word."

"In which case I'll have to fire you," he shot back.

"But you'll die of loneliness here in the booth, boss. You need me. Admit it."

"I'll do no such thing."

"Now, I want to hear from you folks out there. Let's get together and convince this man that he needs me. Anyone who can think of why he should keep me as his partner is welcome to call, and we'll put you on the air."

Kyle's eyes bulged, but before he had a chance to say anything, Meg began the next song.

"Are you crazy?" he challenged as soon as the music began.

"Relax, boss. Being a good deejay means having fun. You should be more laid back."

"What are you talking about?" he said in exasperation. "We're dealing with small town people, Meg. Half of these folks have known me since I was a kid."

"What's that got to do with it? We're just going to get them involved in a few hi-jinks."

"No one's going to call. They'll go about their business and assume I've hired a lunatic."

She started to reply when the telephone receiver light began to glow, signifying a call was coming through. "This is Meg Randall," she answered, glancing at Kyle with an I-told-you-so look.

"Are you going to put me on the air?" a woman asked.

"Just as soon as the song finishes," Meg assured her. "And here we go now. Who do we have here?"

"My name is Wilma Simmons. I've known Kyle Rager since he was in diapers, and I've always thought he was much too serious. You're just what he needs, young lady."

Kyle groaned softly, then, remembering his mike was on, reached down and shut it off.

Meg grinned. "Tell me, Wilma, what did Kyle look like in diapers? Was he a cute baby?"

"He was the most precious thing! His mother and I went to a quilting bee every Friday, and I can still remember the picture she used to show of him running around their living room with no clothes on."

Meg laughed, and Kyle shot her a venomous look.

He switched his microphone on again. "Wilma, enough! You're embarrassing me in front of the most beautiful woman I've seen in years."

Maybe she'd better take things a little easier, Meg decided when the next caller phoned in.

"Kyle, this is Fred Taubes." The masculine voice echoed over the speakers. "What's this about a beautiful new lady deejay? Describe her to me!"

"Describe her to you? You're the town's playboy, Fred," Kyle said with a laugh. "As far as you're concerned, good buddy, she's two-feet-ten and weighs three hundred and twenty pounds."

"I protest!" Meg piped up.

"Play a song, Meg," Kyle intoned.

"You've got it, boss, but I owe you one."

The shift ended two hours later. Kyle looked exhausted as he hung his headphones on the hook near the console.

Meg walked out to the hall, where Kyle joined her seconds later. Her heart froze as she saw the stern expression on his face.

"We need to talk," he said grimly.

"I'm not sure where we're heading with this partnership of ours."

"Well, now that you know I can handle the needs of your listeners, why don't you give me my own time slot? I don't care if it's the midnight shift; I'll take anything."

"I'll have to think about it. You're good, but you're too impulsive. I'm just not sure what to do with you."

She had to admit it was well-deserved criticism. "But that's what makes a deejay appealing to the listeners," she countered. "If I censor everything I say, I'll sound unnatural."

He was about to reply when the receptionist rushed up to them. "Kyle, the station's lines have been ringing off the hook! Everyone wants to know the same thing—are you and Meg going to stay on T.J.'s time slot? They *loved* you!"

"Now I've really got problems," Kyle muttered.

Two hours later Meg sat in Kyle's office waiting for him to get off the telephone. The response to their impromptu twosome was significant. The station's lines continued to be tied up with callers.

Kyle replaced the receiver and stared across his desk at Meg. "I never expected this reaction from the folks out there," he mused. "I've been having trouble finding enough sponsors to make this station run in the black. A team that receives such a favorable response is a good selling point when I try to convince businessmen to book advertising time on our station."

"Give me a chance to work on my own for a few weeks," she pleaded. "If I don't catch on, then we can try working as a team."

"If we ignore the public's reaction to our show, we'll be wasting a golden opportunity." He pursed his lips. "I promised you a job and you'll have one—but only with me as your partner."

Men! Without thinking, she curled up her nose.

"Making faces at me won't help," he chuckled.

She smiled sheepishly. It would be his way or nothing. In that respect he reminded Meg of her ex-husband, Mike. Was she about to get involved with another domineering man who insisted on having his own way in everything?

"What worries you so much about being a team?" he asked softly, in a way that weakened her defenses.

"You and I are so different," she said candidly. "I'm not sure if, in the long run, we wouldn't be courting disaster by trying to work together."

"I'm more down to earth, so I would temper your style a bit." He came around to the front of the desk, standing inches away from her. "Quite by accident we've

stumbled on to something that could help me keep this station on the air." He paused. "Like it or not, the listeners *did* enjoy us," Kyle continued. "There's something you have to understand about me and the reason I started this station. For years I worked for one of the major oil companies in Houston. I started off as a field engineer and climbed all the way up to vice president in charge of foreign operations. I earned a very lucrative salary, but I found that money alone wasn't enough to keep me happy. I wanted to accomplish more than showing a profit on the yearly balance sheets."

He returned to his desk chair. "I grew up in this town. I decided to come back because I felt I could make a difference here. I can reach all sorts of people through KHAY," he continued, with excitement. "I have an opportunity to help make this town better. When I bought this station eight months ago, that was my dream."

"But what's wrong with just entertaining people?" Meg asked softly. "Give them good music and a good show, and you've added some sunshine to their lives."

"Not completely. I want this station to take an active part in getting people involved in community affairs. If it's strictly an entertainment station, we'll be just like KLUV, and that's not what I have in mind at all."

"KLUV?"

He scowled. "The station Monica Hanrahan owns and runs. She's like one of the great whites they spoke of in that movie about sharks," he added acerbically.

Meg laughed. "Your competition, huh?"

"The woman is not to be believed. She owns everything from cattle ranches to oil wells. Some of it she inherited from her husband, Carl, after he died, but she's turned his assets into an empire."

"She sounds like one heck of a lady," Meg replied.

"Oh, there's no denying her accomplishments, but she stops at nothing to get what she wants." His expression took on a thoughtful aspect. "I can still remember when she decided she wanted me!"

Meg chuckled. "I would have thought you'd be flattered."

"You haven't met her. Wait."

The intercom buzzed, interrupting him: "Monica Hanrahan is out here to see you. She heard your—"

Before the receptionist could finish, a tall stately blonde breezed into the office. "I hate to wait for introductions, Kyle." Her eyes darted over Meg with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. "You wouldn't be Meg Randall, would you?"

"I am." Whatever Monica Hanrahan might be, she was not shy and retiring. In some ways Meg was intrigued by her. She instinctively liked any woman who could take charge of a situation simply by walking into a room.

"You're very good on the air, and attractive, too." Monica smiled. "Of course, I *have* heard about you." Her tone let Meg know she was aware of the events that had cost her her job in Phoenix. "You might turn out to be just what Kyle needs. It would be fun if KHAY started giving KLUV some serious competition. Being number one is a lot more fun if you get to engage a worthy adversary and defeat him."

Meg found herself smiling. "What makes you so sure you'd win?"

"Because the alternative, losing, is not acceptable to me. I never settle for it; consequently, I always win."

"Monica doesn't suffer from an overabundance of humility, Meg, as I'm sure you've noticed by now," Kyle said."

"I spent most of my adult life living with a man who insisted on making every

decision for me," Monica shot back. "When he died, I didn't even know how to balance a checkbook." Her eyes narrowed. "But I made it. In fact, I've practically doubled the worth of the estate he left me. I'm not a shrinking violet anymore. If I want something, you'd better believe I'll reach out and take it. I deserve everything I can get."

"No matter what the cost to others?" Kyle asked flatly.

"Don't be overly dramatic, dear. I don't cheat people. I'm just a darned good businesswoman."

"You call a deal like the one you struck with Marc Cooper, the former owner of KLUV, ethical? You didn't pay him a tenth of what the station was worth."

She shrugged. "I made him an offer, and he accepted it. I didn't twist his arm. And remember, after I started to manage it, KLUV became the number one station in this part of the state. You'd do yourself a favor if you'd merge with me. I'm offering you a fair price. And you'd still be able to manage KHAY—as long as you followed my guidelines, of course." She sat down on a corner of Kyle's desk and gave him a long look. "If you wait until you *have* to sell, my price won't be as generous."

Kyle remained unmoved by her threat. With calm self-confidence he replied, "If you really thought I was going to fail, you wouldn't make me an offer. You'd wait until you could buy KHAY dirt-cheap. What worries you is that I'll push you right out of the number one position, and you'll end up facing quite a drop in revenue."

"Let's just say I'm not staying up nights worrying about it," she replied with a chuckle.

Kyle scowled and said sharply, "Monica, is there something specific you wanted? Because, in case you haven't noticed, you've interrupted a business

meeting.”

She smiled. “I see I’ve struck a nerve. How delightful. You look very cute when you’re angry.”

Hearing such a traditionally chauvinistic line coming from Monica made Meg laugh.

Monica winked at her. “They can dish it out, but they can’t take it, can they?”

Without another word she sauntered out of Kyle’s office.

“You think this is amusing, don’t you?” he accused.

“I think Monica is absolutely formidable,” Meg replied candidly. “In fact, she’s exactly the kind of person I hope to become someday.”

“That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard anyone wish upon herself.” Kyle’s eyes flashed with anger.

Meg started to reply, then lapsed into silence. It wasn’t smart to antagonize her boss on the first day. “All right. Let’s get back to what we were discussing—my job here at the station.”

“Do you accept the idea of us working together as a team?” he asked.

“Are you giving me a choice?” she asked.

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive,” he insisted.

Meg sighed. “In that case, boss, I accept.”

“I thought you might,” he smiled smugly.

“Don’t gloat, boss. It doesn’t become you.”

“Don’t call me *boss*, and I’m not gloating,” he laughed.

“How soon do you want me to start working?”

“How about tomorrow?” he countered immediately. “I’ll switch T.J. to the afternoon time slot, and you and I will share morning drive time.”

“All right. Everything I brought from

Phoenix is in the trunk of my car, so it shouldn’t be hard to get settled—once I find a place to live.” She cocked her head. “This is your town. Any suggestions?”

“As a matter of fact, I know of an elderly lady who’s looking for someone to share her home with. She lives in a beautiful old house about five miles from here. She wouldn’t charge you much.”

“Speaking of expenses, what about my salary?”

He scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

“You’re kidding! This is barely poverty level! Surely you can do better than this.”

“That’s the point. I can’t.” He rubbed his chin. “I realize you couldn’t live on this sum in Phoenix, but it’s adequate for this area, believe me.”

She stared at the figure and sighed. Once this job got her back into the broadcasting scene, she could always move on to better things later. “All right,” she said.

“See? We *can* get along.” Kyle stood, extended his hand, and clasped hers in a firm handshake. His eyes probed hers with sensual warmth. “Welcome to KHAY.”

Meg drove her beat-up Chevy along the main road through the outskirts of Cabezon until the pavement gave way to gravel. Her destination, a large wood-frame Victorian house, stood out against the deserted landscape.

As she pulled into the driveway and got out of the car, a plump white-haired woman came out to greet her. “I’m Kate Brown. You must be Meg Randall,” she said enthusiastically. “Kyle just called and said you might be stopping by, but I wasn’t sure you’d ever find me way out here.”

“I got directions from Kyle’s secretary,” Meg smiled as she followed her into the front hall. “This is a beautiful

house. Unusual architecture for this area."

"It's a replica of the house I grew up in near Charleston. My husband built it for me years ago when we moved here... to convince me to stay." Kate laughed. "Of course the past few years, since Jim died, have been lonely. That's why I decided to have a boarder. It's my nephew's idea, really. He thinks I shouldn't live alone this far out of town at my age."

"He must care a great deal about you," Meg said warmly as she looked around appreciatively.

"I'm a good housekeeper and I'm also a good cook. Your rent would include breakfast and dinner," Kate said.

"It sounds wonderful, but I better ask how much you charge. I'm on a strict budget," Meg said hesitantly.

"Let me show you your room first." Kate led the way upstairs and opened a door. "This is it."

A large ornate canopied bed stood in the center. To one side was a small nightstand on which had been placed a glass vase containing a single red rose. The handmade quilt on the bed had been crafted in ivory and shades of light blue to match the walls.

"Now I *know* I can't afford to stay here," Meg said.

"I don't charge much, really," Kate replied. "It's two hundred dollars a month for room and board."

Meg could scarcely believe her ears. "It's perfect!"

"So you'll stay?"

"I'd be delighted."

Meg followed Kate downstairs. Sitting at a round table in the cozy kitchen, she signed a three-month lease. "I guess we're all set, then," she said. "I'll go get the trunks out of my car."

"Take your time. My nephew should be along shortly, and he'll be glad to give you a hand taking your luggage upstairs."

By the way, in case you ever get locked out and can't get hold of me, he has a spare key in his desk at the office. Since you both work at the same place, it should be easy to borrow his. I meant to tell you earlier. You two sure make a great radio team."

It took Meg several seconds to understand. "Wait a minute. Your nephew can't be—"

At that instant the back door flew open. "Hello, Aunt Kate!" Kyle exclaimed.

Back in her room, Meg tried to sort out her thoughts as she dressed for dinner at the Mexican restaurant Kyle had insisted upon. Much as she liked Aunt Kate, she was disturbed at this further link with Kyle and intended to tell him so.

The restaurant was only a short drive away. Once they were settled at their table and Kyle had ordered, she began, "Are you aware that you've put me in a very difficult position?"

"You've got a great room and a very nice woman to share a large, beautiful home with. What's wrong?"

"Kyle, you're my boss, and she's your aunt! I feel as if I'm on the job twenty-four hours a day. What if Kate and I have an argument, for instance? How will that affect my relationship with you at work?"

"I promise that whatever happens between you and Aunt Kate will stay between you two."

"I'm not sure about this," Meg said warily.

Their dinner arrived and they ate in uncomfortable silence. "I guess I'd better tell you the whole story," Kyle said finally. "I'm very fond of Aunt Kate. About two months ago I began to notice that she was getting absentminded. She'd miss appointments and forget people's names—that sort of thing. The doctor said it was simply a result of aging and that there was nothing to be done about it, but I was still concern-

ed about her living all alone so far from town. I asked her to move in with me, but she wouldn't hear of it. That's when I began looking for someone I felt was trustworthy enough to watch over her and help her out a bit.

"My intent was not to trick you, Meg. Honest. I knew you'd get a good deal from my Aunt Kate. At the same time, I'd feel better having you live with her."

"It's not that simple, Kyle. I understand why you acted the way you did, but I hate underhandedness."

His shoulders slumped. "If that's the way you feel, then I'll speak to my aunt as soon as we get back."

"Please don't put words in my mouth," she objected. "I haven't made my decision yet."

He picked up the check. "I'm not going to say another word. That's the closest you've come to an actual yes."

By the time they returned to Kate's house, Meg had made up her mind. She'd stay. After all, by taking a stand she had proven that the decision had been strictly her choice, not one imposed on her.

"I've decided to stay," she told Kyle as they approached the front door.

"That's great!" He started to come closer, but stopped when she took a step back.

"Kyle, there's something you have to understand about me. I don't like being told what to do by anyone."

"At the risk of making you angry again, I have to say you're rather touchy on that subject, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am," she conceded.

She had been physically attracted to her ex-husband, Mike Randall, in much the same way that she was now attracted to Kyle, and Mike had been a skillful manipulator. He had managed to coerce her into doing almost anything he wanted. She'd never be that docile and easily manipulated again. "Kyle, I have

very good reasons for being the way I am. Maybe someday I'll tell you a bit about myself and you'll understand."

"We can talk now. I'd like to get to know you much better. Why not just relax and enjoy the evening with me? It's a beautiful night," Kyle said quietly as he took her hand and led her to the porch swing. "Will you please just sit here beside me and relax?"

Meg laughed and acquiesced.

After a moment, he said: "If you're cold you can snuggle up to me."

When Meg turned to look at him, he tilted her chin upward until he had captured her eyes.

Moving his lips slowly over hers, he coaxed her to yield to the intoxicating magic flowering between them. A slow, consuming fire began to spread through her, a desire so strong that it frightened her and gave her the courage to push away from him and get up from the swing.

"I'm sorry, Kyle, I shouldn't have let that happen."

"There's nothing to be sorry about." His voice was deep, his manner infinitely patient as he rose also.

Yearning still tingled within her, declaring war against her determination not to return to his arms. She stared at his hands, wondering what it would be like to feel them intimately caressing her.

"I like the way you're looking at me," he said huskily.

She choked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do," he replied calmly. He strode toward her on the front porch steps.

The closer he came, the less clear her thoughts grew. "What are you doing?" she blurted out.

He paused. "I was going to suggest we go to your car and get your trunks. If you're going to live here, you'll want the rest of your things."

Feeling foolish, she tried to cover up her embarrassment. "That's a great idea. I'm all for making you suffer."

"Suffer?" Kyle walked beside her to the car. As he waited for her to find her keys, he gave her a suspicious look. "That doesn't bode well at all," he mused.

Meg and Kyle's first official morning show went very well, or at least Meg thought so. Having Kyle to kid and match wits with was a lot more fun than working alone. At first, Kyle seemed to enjoy himself too, but he was scowling by the time they finished their shift.

"Meg, you're too unpredictable," he growled as they left the booth. "You'll just have to modify your style."

"Why can't you adapt yours to suit mine?" she asked, following him into his office.

"I don't have time to discuss this now," he said grimly as he reached to answer his phone, "but I want you at my house at six o'clock to work up a more formal structure for our show. *Be there*," he said as Meg started to protest. She slammed the door as she left.

She was still angry as she drove to Kyle's house later, and she did not calm down as she sat at his dining room table staring at the list of ideas he had typed up.

"I can't believe you," she said. "You've got everything timed to the minute. If you try to adhere to this schedule, you're going to drive yourself—and me—crazy."

"And what do you suggest?" he asked coldly.

"We want the audience to have fun listening to our show and we want them to take an active part in it. Let's get their attention by giving them something that's almost guaranteed to make them tune in each day."

"Like what?"

She pursed her lips. "We could have trivia contests during the first fifteen

minutes. Then we could have another segment in which the audience calls in and shares their best homemaker tips—everything from how to remove stubborn spots to how to make a fast meal."

"I'll tell you what. Instead of just asking the audience, we'll compile our own homemaker tips, then ask the listeners to elaborate on them. That way we're, not just turning the show over to them."

She shrugged. "Sure, we could do that, but it'll take lots more work and research."

"But don't you think it'll be much better that way?" He began rapidly to scribble down notes. "As far as your trivia contest goes... we could place our focus on state and local government."

She saw immediately problems with his ideas, plus, his determination to modify everything she suggested was beginning to annoy her. "That's going to take hours of research!" she protested.

"Yes, but think of what we can do for the public's awareness," he said enthusiastically. "It will be well worth the effort."

Taking deep breaths, she tried to quiet her anger. "Kyle, if you already know what you want to do with the show why did you ask me here?"

"Meg, why are you so touchy? Tell me what's going on." Kyle came over to her side of the table, took her hand and led her into the den. He sat down on the leather sofa and patted the spot next to him. "Please Meg, talk to me."

"All right." She settled deep into the cushions. "I guess it all dates back to when I was married to Mike Randall. I met him during my junior year at college. When he asked me to marry him a year later, I was ecstatic. I knew Mike was demanding, but I thought that once we were married, we'd learn to adapt to each other and everything would be fine." She

took a deep breath. "Of course, it wasn't. I quit college at the start of my senior year because he was so adamant about it. He claimed I was so busy studying that I never had enough time to be a wife.

"It took two years for our marriage to self-destruct and during those two years I had to live with a man who constantly put down my ideas as worthless," Meg went on. "Most of the time he completely brushed aside my suggestions. But if he was forced to accept one of my ideas because he couldn't think of anything better, he'd change it until I hardly recognized it as my own. That way he could claim that my contribution had been negligible."

"Now I know why you got angry when we were brainstorming." Kyle clasped her hand tenderly between both of his. "I'm not like your ex-husband, Meg. As far as I'm concerned, we're a team. We'll be equally infamous," he added roguishly.

She chuckled, then grew serious. "I'll try to stop being so sensitive."

"I have only one question. If you thought Mike was trying to control you, why did you let him do it?"

"Mike knew how much I loved him, and he used my feelings against me. When I really care for someone, I instinctively want to please them. That's my Achilles' heel." She instantly regretted admitting so much to him. "But enough about me. Let's talk about you for a change. Have you ever been married, Kyle?"

He shook his head. "My life's hardly been monastic, Meg, but as for a special person..."—he pursed his lips—"... there's only been one."

"What was she like?" she asked hesitantly.

"Anna was an engineer for the oil company where I worked. I thought she was everything I had ever wanted in a woman, but slowly I began to see another side of her. She cared more for money and status than she did for anything else in

life—including me. When she was offered a prestigious overseas post with the company, she took it."

"Do you miss her?" Meg felt compelled to ask.

"No. After she left I decided it was time I started pursuing my own goals. That was when I decided to come back to Cabezon."

"Now that you have your own radio station, what's next?"

"Making it a success," he countered good-naturedly. "And, of course, I don't plan to spend the rest of my life as a bachelor. I'm not actively looking for a wife, but I'm not closed to the possibility either."

"With me it's just the opposite," she replied, feeling uneasy. "I've had my fill of marriage. Being single means that I answer only to myself. There's a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that I'm completely responsible for what becomes of me."

"I won't argue against the obvious advantages, but being single also has its disadvantages. Don't blind yourself to them."

The second she met his eyes, she knew she had made a mistake. She knew he would kiss her and that she'd do nothing to stop him.

He must have sensed her thoughts. As his lips descended, Meg caught a glimpse of his victorious smile.

The sensations that flooded over her blocked out everything except the wonderful hard feel of him pressing against her. Her hands traveled over his smoothly muscled shoulders. "We need time to get to know each other," he whispered, tightening his hold on her. "Once we do, working together will be a lot easier."

His statement reached into her mind, bringing back painful memories of her marriage to Mike. Was Kyle hoping that

by mastering her senses with his touch, she'd also bend to his will in every other respect?

Very deliberately she moved away from him. "Please leave me alone," she said. "If you think you can seduce me into being more cooperative at work, then you'd better forget it. It won't work."

He stared at her in surprise. "Is it so hard to accept that all I want is the chance to enjoy your company?"

"It's the other things you want that worry me," she retorted, then paused. "Kyle," she said finally, "I think it's time I went home. I need a chance to be alone and think."

He didn't stop her when she picked up her purse from the couch and walked to the door. Resisting the temptation to glance back, she left and drove home.

The new program they worked out managed to incorporate both Meg's need for flexibility and Kyle's need for structure. The various segments, from the trivia contests to the helpful household tips, quickly began to acquire a loyal following. Their format was only four days old when, judging by the increased number of telephone calls to the station, it was deemed a success.

Meg sat on the carpeted floor in Kyle's office, leafing through volumes of *Who's Who*. "The idea you had earlier this morning about honoring Americans whose contributions to society were above and beyond the call of duty is great in theory, but it's a headache in practice," she said. "How the heck am I even supposed to find these people, let alone write profiles on them?"

"Aren't you glad I've given you this terrific opportunity to impress me with your resourcefulness?"

She started to reply, but at that instant Monica Hanrahan strolled into Kyle's office and glanced down at Meg with an ex-

pression of haughty contempt. "Really, dear, don't you at least merit a chair and desk?"

Meg chuckled softly, darting a quick look at Kyle.

"To what do we owe the displeasure of your visit?" Kyle asked coldly.

"I wanted to tell you not to get your hopes up too high. Your station is showing signs of life, but in the end you can't compete with KLUV. You simply haven't got the resources, but I want you to know I appreciate the gallant effort you're making to stay in business. I'll try to remember that when it's time to buy you out."

Kyle laughed. "And you'll be glad to pay me exactly what KHAY's worth—as long as I'm willing to accept payment in T-shirts with your name on them, right?"

Monica chuckled. "So you do admit that sooner or later KHAY will be mine."

"I was trying to make a different point, my greedy friend." Kyle ushered her politely to the door. "And now, if you're finished, Meg and I have a lot of work to do."

After giving Meg a tiny wave, Monica leaned toward Kyle and kissed him on the cheek. "I can't wait until you're working for me," she said seductively.

Before Kyle could react, Monica strolled away.

"The gall of that woman!" He grimaced.

Meg grinned and returned to her work. "I'll bet Monica's going to launch an offensive," she said at last, "so we'd better come up with an idea that will keep our audience faithful."

"What do you have in mind?"

"How about a contest with a prize?"

"We can't afford it."

"It doesn't have to cost a lot of money. What we need is something that will get our listeners involved. A game."

He pursed his lips. "You might have a point there. How about a treasure hunt?"

"That's a great idea!"

"The problem is: What do we use as a treasure?"

For several minutes neither one said anything. Meg began to pace around the room. "To be consistent with your philosophy," she began, "it has to be something that shows that KHAY cares for the community."

"How about burying T-shirts with the logo 'KHAY Loves New Mexico'? We could even put on one of those little hearts instead of spelling out the word *love*."

"That's great, except for two things. First, what size T-shirts would you bury? And when people found out that the station's treasure was only a T-shirt, don't you think that both you, and the station, would look cheap?"

He shrugged. "Okay. So come up with a better idea."

She began pacing again. "I think you were on the right track when you thought of a heart." She stopped abruptly and faced him. "How about buying a solid gold heart and having it engraved with 'KHAY always cares'? We could start plugging the contest as KHAY's treasure hunt—from the station with the heart of gold."

"Gold heart? That's going to cost a fortune!"

"So make it a small one and encase it in a beautiful velvet box. Then we'll bury it someplace."

"You mean about the size of a charm or a pendant?"

"That's the idea," she replied enthusiastically.

He nodded. "I like it. In fact, I think it's close to being brilliant."

"Close to?"

"Had it been my idea, it would have been brilliant," he teased. "Where shall we bury it?"

"This is your town, so I'll leave that to you." She bit her lip. "Wait, I just had a

terrific idea. We'll bury it right underneath KLUV's sign in front of Monica Hanrahan's station! Nobody would accidentally find it *there*!"

Kyle laughed so hard that he had to lean against his desk for support. "I love it. It's truly Machiavellian. That, my beautiful partner, is a brilliant idea."

Meg accompanied Kyle on an afternoon shopping trip in search of just the right gold heart. It was late evening by the time they found exactly what they were looking for at a shop in Sante Fe.

Meg stared at the two delicately handcrafted hearts. "They're beautiful."

"They're the only two of their kind," the goldsmith informed them, "but I can sell them to you either separately or as a set."

Meg glanced at Kyle. "One of these would be perfect for what we want." She picked up one of the tiny pendants. "I only wish I had the money to buy the other one," she added sadly.

Kyle took the heart from her and glanced up at the goldsmith. "We'll need to have it engraved."

"I can do it right now, while you wait, if you'd like."

Kyle accepted gratefully.

On their return trip to Cabezon Meg fingered the delicate pendant. "I envy whoever finds it," she murmured.

Kyle glanced over at her. His eyes softened with a tender warmth that caused her pulse to leap. As his gaze dropped to the heart resting delicately in the palm of her hand, he squeezed her arm gently. "I just had a great idea. If you're not too tired when we get back, why don't we sneak out to KLUV and bury it tonight?"

Meg chuckled. "We might as well; otherwise, I might be tempted to abscond with our treasure."

Kyle just winked.

At midnight Meg and Kyle crept out

under the KLUV sign and buried the gold heart. For the next week KHAY's jocks read Meg and Kyle's clues once every hour, but no one in their ever-growing listening audience found the treasure.

On the eighth day, Meg prepared to announce their latest clue, hoping the prize would be found soon while public interest was at its peak. "Now folks," she said, "listen carefully and we're sure to get a winner today: Beneath the darkened sign of love, our heart is hidden from above."

Spotting the red light indicating an incoming call, Kyle picked up the receiver, then switched the communication over to the box on the console. "KHAY, the station with the heart of gold. This is Kyle Rager. Can I help you?"

"You swine!" Monica's voice was amplified in the booth. "You've got a heck of a lot of nerve burying *your* promotional trinket under *my* sign."

Kyle's eyes sparkled with devilish amusement. "Wait a minute, Monica. Are you saying that *you* found it? What were you doing looking for it in the first place?"

"Your childish clues were so idiotically simple that I began to get suspicious. I decided to check them out, and of course I found the heart."

Meg chuckled. "Ask her if she wants to go on the air as our winner."

"Did you hear that?" He repeated the question.

Monica's voice rose shrilly. "You want war, do you? Well, you've got it, buddy boy. I'm going to wipe that little radio station of yours clear off the map."

As the sound of the dial tone echoed in their headsets, Kyle and Meg continued to laugh.

"And there you have it. Another satisfied winner," Meg teased. "Shall we announce the news over the air?"

"You bet. In fact, I think I'll do the honors myself."

The news captured Cabezon by surprise. The KHAY telephone lines began to ring frantically as people called in to share their amusement.

It was close to noon by the time Meg and Kyle were finally free to take a break. Enjoying the breeze and the bright sunshine, they walked to a small cafe a block from the station.

The waitress greeted them warmly. "Hi! We were wondering when you two were going to stop by. We always listen to your show. You guys make a perfect team."

"Thanks," Meg replied, feeling like a celebrity.

"If I put you two in the middle of the room, you won't get enough privacy even to finish lunch, so why don't I seat you at the corner booth?"

As the waitress left, Meg grinned. "I feel like a Hollywood movie star."

"Well, now that we're terribly famous," he said in a fake British accent, "we'll have to be careful and not let it go to our heads."

"Neither one of you is in any immediate danger," Monica interrupted, appearing unexpectedly at their table. "First you have to have heads it can go to."

"Monica!" Kyle smiled broadly. "Our grand-prize winner! I'm delighted to see you."

"Stuff it," she said through clenched teeth. "I saw you when I came in, so I thought I'd drop by your table and warn you."

"About what?" Kyle asked good-naturedly.

"The way I see it, you've declared war. So KLUV is retaliating by launching a promotion that'll annihilate your little station once and for all. We're going to give away an oil well."

"A real one, that works?" Meg asked, aghast.

"You bet. Also, I'm sure you've heard of that radio soap opera that's been making history with its high ratings? Well, KLUV has acquired syndication rights."

"And when will all this begin?" Kyle asked, his tone taut as he tried unsuccessfully to sound uninterested.

"Tomorrow we'll start advertising our contest, which will begin next week, as will the soap opera."

The minute Monica was out of hearing range, Meg leaned forward. "Kyle, she's really bringing in the heavy artillery. If she takes away a large percentage of our audience, that'll really hurt your advertising revenue."

"Of course it will," Kyle answered.

"Can the station withstand the financial loss?"

"I think so," he said slowly. "Of course, that all depends on the extent of the damage she inflicts." His mouth tightened. "I think you and I had better start thinking of ways to counter Monica's offensive."

The first day of KLUV's Extravaganza Week brought good news and bad news for KHAY. The bad news was that people were really excited about KLUV's "Nightbeat," a soap opera about the adventures of an investigative reporter.

Kyle brought the good news as he burst through his office door. "You won't believe it," he told Meg. "The very first person who called in for Monica's oil well contest won the prize. The question was on American history and the caller was a retired professor of guess what? American history." Kyle chortled. "So much for Monica's plan to use her oil well to get more listeners."

But Kyle's elation was short lived. In the next two weeks KHAY began to feel the effects of KLUV's new programming. The number of callers who contacted them during their show began to decrease

noticeably.

Though Kyle claimed not to be worried, Meg sensed his consternation. After their Tuesday morning show she gathered her courage and decided to broach the subject.

"Kyle, we're going to have to come up with a way to counter the following Monica's soap opera is acquiring. By running two episodes daily, she's taking our audience away. People tune in, then stick with KLUV's programs instead of switching the dial back to KHAY."

"Her budget is practically limitless, Meg," Kyle said. "There isn't anything I can do to compete with an expensive syndicated series like 'Nightbeat.'"

"Maybe we're looking at this problem all wrong," Meg said. For several moments she remained silent, her thoughts racing. "We could do a spoof of 'Nightbeat,' incorporating enough differences into the material to avoid legal problems. Our own story line could loosely parallel the series Monica's airing. If we make ours funny, and run it an hour after her scheduled episodes, I'm sure people will start tuning back to us."

Kyle smiled brightly. "Boy, am I glad you're on my side." He took her hands in his, his thumbs brushing her wrists in feather-like caresses.

A sweet weakness spread through her. "Kyle," she said with impulsive sincerity, "for the first time in months I feel truly happy. Working for you, and KHAY," she added quickly, suddenly feeling unaccountably embarrassed, "has been the best thing I've ever done for myself."

His blue eyes shone with an intensity that left her breathless. "Why do you think that is?" he asked softly.

The second she had uttered the words, she sensed the folly of making the earnest admission. "I think I'll start the script right now. I'm going to call our spoof 'Nightly,'" she said quickly.

"You're avoiding the issue," he persisted.

"You noticed," she replied boldly.

The first week was the hardest. Between racing against the clock to write the script, and keeping track of Monica's broadcasts, Kyle and Meg barely had time for anything except work.

It was Saturday morning, fifteen minutes before they were to sign off. Meg read the last few lines of their "Nightly" segment, placed cartridges in the machine, and soon taped music was on the air.

Kyle removed his headphones and reached for the telephone receiver. "No, our next installment won't be aired until Monday," he told an enthusiastic fan.

Meg turned the console over to the afternoon deejay, then walked out into the hall with Kyle. "I'm ready to expire. I've never worked so hard or slept so little in my entire life!"

"I have some news that might make you feel better. I've hired a copywriter to take some of the pressure off us by writing the household hints and profiles."

"That's great, but I thought you couldn't afford it."

"I can now," Kyle said as he held open his office door for her. "KHAY picked up two new sponsors this week, thanks to your spoof. I just want you to know that I really appreciate all you've done. You're really something."

"The entire staff has been putting in lots of extra time, and they did it because of the loyalty they feel toward you."

"And how do you feel?" he asked quietly.

"I think you're a special man, Kyle."

He gently pulled her toward him. Standing inches away, he held her gaze for a brief eternity.

The unspoken communication tore the breath from her lungs. She wanted to run,

to force the desire that smoldered within her far into the recesses of her soul, where it couldn't hurt her. Yet something more powerful prevented her from doing either.

"Yet, when all is said and done, you're still not ready to trust me," he stated with unmistakable disappointment.

"Don't you see?" She tried to find the words to express her confused feelings. "I just don't want to be hurt again. If I don't let myself care for you, then I'm safe."

"You'd be safe anyway, Meg, but I guess I'll have to let you discover that for yourself."

When he drew away, she felt as if her heart had suddenly gone into a deep freeze. "Kyle, I do care," she said.

He turned and smiled. "That's a start, Meg."

The intercom buzzer sounded, interrupting him. After a brief conversation he glanced up. "You know, I just had a great idea. I'm going to throw a party at the station tonight to celebrate the team spirit that has put us in the running again."

It took the rest of the day to arrange the details, but by seven that evening every member of the staff had showed up at the station to celebrate. T.J. McKay was working the evening shift that night and several other people were in the booth with him. The musical selections from his show were being piped into every room. Some of the office staff were dancing in the hall outside the sound booth.

Meg smiled up at Kyle as he took her arm and gently pulled her into an unlit hallway. "Kyle, I've worked in a lot of places, but I've never seen this kind of loyalty. It's because of the kind of man you are," she said softly.

"And are you glad we're a team, Meg?"

He stood so close. The temptation to melt into his arms was like an unbearable

ache inside her.

Then, as if she'd been struck by a lightning bolt, she realized that she was falling in love with him! The realization left her dazed and more than a little scared. But more than anything, she wanted to tell him how she felt.

"I'm not sure when it happened, but you and I have become so close it's as if we're a part of each other." She hesitated, then continued boldly—"I like the feelings you bring out in me, even though they scare me half to death. You're more than just a boss and a good friend, Kyle. And that's the most frightening and terrific thing that's happened to me in a long time."

"Oh, Meg." With a groan he pulled her farther into the darkness and guided his mouth to hers. Passion whipped against them, leaving Meg trembling.

"Let's sneak away. We've already talked with everyone here. They'll never miss us."

She nodded, wanting him more than she had ever dreamed possible.

As they drove to Kyle's house, his hand covered hers. "Meg, there are so many things I've wanted to say to you, but now the words won't come." He pulled into his driveway and brought the car to a stop.

Meg buried her face against his shoulder. "Then don't tell me. Show me what you want me to know."

Without hesitating he scooped her from the passenger's side and carried her across the driveway to the front door. "I want tonight to be even better than any fantasy you've ever had, Meg," he said as he carried her across the threshold and into the bedroom, then lowered her gently onto his bed. Holding her against his chest, he whispered, "Tonight we'll discover each other, my sweet lady, and I'll do everything in my power to make that journey one you'll never forget."

Her desire grew as she sensed the barely

leashed hunger in him. With a groan he pulled her to her feet and began to undress himself and then her. Garments dropped one by one to the carpeted floor as his lips, warm and seeking, pressed against her temple, then slowly moved across her cheekbones, coming to rest at the base of her throat.

His arms wrapped tightly around her waist as he pushed her backward onto the bed. His hand drifted lazily over the swell of her breasts, molding and shaping the pliant flesh.

Her lips parted involuntarily as he bent over her, his body poised. She exulted in the need that drove him to make her yield completely to him, but it was his tenderness that pierced her heart. "Make love to me, Kyle," she pleaded, arching her hips in an age-old invitation.

She gasped at the first shuddering impact, feeling her body become one with his. Her fingers clung to the tight muscles of his shoulders as she gave herself completely, holding nothing back, seeking the ultimate union as the world came apart, then shuddered in delicious ecstasy...

For long moments neither of them moved.

Meg opened her eyes slowly. "Have I only dreamed you, or are you real?"

His mouth covered hers. "By the time the sun rises, you won't have the slightest doubt."

Meg awoke the next morning with Kyle's arms still around her. An uneasy feeling slowly spread through her as she remembered awakening in her ex-husband's arms. Her physical needs had betrayed her once. Had she made the same mistake again? She edged away from Kyle and slipped out of bed.

"Good morning," he said sleepily, reaching out for her.

She pulled away. "I'm hardly ever in a romantic mood when I look like Mr.

Hyde—and I usually do before eight in the morning.”

“You’re beautiful,” he insisted, “and downright feisty before breakfast.”

“Speaking of breakfast,” she said, dressing quickly, “I do hope you intend to treat me to a sumptuous meal.”

He groaned and tossed the covers back to get up. “I’ll treat you to the best toast and coffee in town.”

“You’ve got it,” Meg said.

As the coffee began to brew, Kyle joined her at the kitchen table. “By the way, we acquired a new advertising client yesterday, Kelly’s Greenhouse. We’re going to have to produce a spot for him during our morning show.”

“Okay. No problem. We’ll just ad-lib something like we normally do. It sounds much more natural that way.”

“I don’t like doing that, Meg. I can’t tell you how much I hate to feel pressured like that on the air. I’m always concerned that we won’t cover the material we’re supposed to, or that I’ll say something wrong and misrepresent the product.”

“Is it really that hard for you?” she asked.

“It is,” he said matter-of-factly. “If you had one ounce of compassion you’d make my life easier by giving in and agreeing to work the spots from a script.”

She pursed her lips. “I hate scripts,” she muttered.

He covered her hand with his own. “But you’re fond of me, and think what you’d be doing for my peace of mind,” he cajoled.

“All right,” she conceded, “We’ll do it your way.”

When the coffee finished, Kyle brought out two cups. “While I get this ready, will you start the toast?”

Meg was buttering a slice of toast when the realization struck her. The one thing she had always considered sacred was her style on the air. She radiated a relaxed

aura simply because she worked her way. Now, having lowered her guard around Kyle, she was making concessions that directly affected her performance on the job! Love had entered her life once again, and almost-immediately she had started to weaken.

She slammed the butter knife down on the counter. “Listen, I’ve changed my mind about breakfast. I think it’s time for me to go home.”

He looked up in dismay. “What brought this on?”

“Kyle, look at us.” She waved a hand around the kitchen. “This little domestic scene is cute and all that, but it isn’t what I want for myself.”

His eyes bored into her. “Are you listening to yourself? You’re so afraid to love someone that the remotest possibility makes you run back into your shell. I thought our partnership went deeper than just business. Or is success all you’re really interested in?”

“That’s not true, and you know it. You’re just mad because you can’t accept the fact that I’m not about to pine away at your feet just because we had sex last night.”

It took only a cursory glance at him to realize how much her words had hurt him. She wanted to take them back, but it was too late.

“Fine,” he said, his voice taut. “If that’s the way you feel, then go ahead and leave.”

Meg made what she hoped was a grand exit, but as soon as she got outside she realized that she’d come in Kyle’s car and it was a six-mile walk to the station! She went back to his front door and knocked softly.

Kyle opened the door. He had dressed and was smiling smugly. “Need a ride back to your car, huh?”

“Yes,” she choked and followed him to his car. They drove to the station park-

ing lot in uneasy silence. "See you at work," Kyle said evenly as he drove off.

When Meg got to the station Monday morning, Kyle announced that he'd already written their "Nightly" script. The first half hour of their show went smoothly. Then Kyle began to read his script. Their hero, Harry Newsflash, had found love. But his beloved had locked herself in a closet, claiming that every time she fell in love she ate uncontrollably and gained ten pounds. As he read the script, Meg felt the blood drain from her face.

"Melinda, my sweet, come out. Let me take care of you. You need never fear my love."

"I'll never come out. I'm going to hide away in my nice safe closet for the rest of my life."

"But, Melinda, don't you see? If you stay in there, you'll languish away all alone. Love carries risks, but it also promises life."

Slowly the closet door opened. Melinda peered out, then jumped into Harry's arms. "You're right. I don't want to go on without you. I'll risk the weight gain. You're worth it!"

"And I'll help you lose those pounds again. Married people have their ways, you know."

"Now I have a question for you folks out there," Kyle told the audience. "If a man is in love with a woman who's afraid to admit her feelings, what's the best way to help her get over that fear?"

Calls began to come in.

"He should love her and be patient, don't you think, Meg?" a woman caller asked.

Meg choked. "I...uh..."

Kyle grinned. "What do you think, Meg?"

"Well," she said, searching desperately

for an answer, "maybe in certain cases the man should give up."

"I'm curious," the next caller ventured. "Kyle, ol' buddy you wouldn't be alluding to a romance between you and Meg, would you?"

Meg slithered down in her chair and covered her face.

"Our Meg, afraid of anything? Naw!" Kyle told their listener.

Sensing a way to change the topic, Meg said, "Fear's an interesting thing to speculate on. For instance, what frightens men?"

"We'll let our audience think about that while we play the next selections," Kyle intoned.

As soon as the microphones were turned off, Meg glared at him. "Are you out of your mind? I've never been so embarrassed in all my life."

"Really? And to think I can evoke all that emotion."

As their taped selections reached an end, Kyle switched the microphones back on.

"I know what men are afraid of," a woman caller ventured. "They're terrified of not being good in sports. Ever notice how they'll cheerfully kill themselves just to win a game of basketball or tennis?"

"Hey, that's not fair," Kyle interjected. "Athletic women are the same way."

"I wouldn't know," Meg sighed. "I'm not into sports. In fact, my idea of hell was taking gym class."

"Did you know that KLUV is sponsoring a physical fitness month?" one caller informed them. "You guys sound as if you could use the exercise."

Kyle laughed. "Even in our current physical condition we could outdo KLUV. In fact, since we've been discussing sports..." Pushing the button for a clear line, he began to dial the disk jockey

at KLUV.

"This is Kyle Rager from KHAY, Jon, and we're on the air right now. The reason I'm calling is that I hear you people have a physical fitness project going. Since we want to prove to everyone that KHAY's jocks are far superior in every way, we'd like to challenge your station to a softball game."

The disk jockey hedged. "I'd have to check this out first, Kyle."

"I'll tell you what. Talk to your people, and then get back to us. The proceeds from the game will benefit a charity we mutually agree on."

It took twenty minutes for KLUV to come back with an official response. "We need some time to make the arrangements," Monica Hanrahan said over the speakers, "but how about the last Saturday of this month, at J. Edgar Hoover High's baseball field?"

"You've got it," Kyle promised.

"I'll be looking forward to it. Oh, and Kyle," she added sweetly, "all the jocks have to play—whether or not they know diddly squat about softball."

Meg shook her head vigorously. "Wait a minute."

Kyle held up his hand. "No problem at all."

As soon as the music began, Meg turned angrily to him. "I can't believe you've done this to me! I've never been able to hit a ball in my life."

"I'll teach you. Don't worry."

"Of course I'll worry," she retorted flatly as she turned back to the console. "It's one of my specialties."

Meg sat in Kyle's office, taking sips from a can of cola. "The response we've received to our proposed softball game during these past two days has been great," she said. "People know KLUV and KHAY have been embroiled in some pretty tough competition, and now they

can't wait to see it made public."

"It'll be fun, too, though I'm sure there are some people"—Kyle grinned—"who don't agree with me. By the way, what do you think of having everyone from our station get together at Aunt Kate's after the game? We'll throw a celebration party."

"And what if we lose?" Meg challenged.

"We can't lose, sweetheart. Not with all the publicity we're getting. Don't you see? It's not the softball game itself that matters, but the fact that we're getting people better acquainted with KHAY."

Meg nodded. "Of course, if we win, we'll have one heck of a celebration."

"Then the matter's settled. I'll call Aunt Kate. She's been asking me for a long time to bring everyone over."

"Wait." Meg grimaced. "I completely forgot to tell you. Kate asked me to deliver a message to you this morning. Her sister called last night, and Kate's decided to leave for California late today for a visit. She'll be gone for at least ten days."

Kyle groaned. "And I bet she's just about cleared out her savings account to get enough money to go."

His eyes met hers in a plea. "I need your help. I want to go to Aunt Kate's house right now, and convince her to let me pay her expenses. She really doesn't have money for plane fare, and if I know her, she's probably arranged to take the bus. Would you come with me?"

"All right. I'll be glad to help you any way I can."

Meg followed Kyle in her car. When they arrived at Kate's house, the older woman was pulling two medium-sized suitcases onto the porch. "Hi!" She waved to both of them.

"Aunt Kate, what are you doing?" Kyle demanded.

"Didn't Meg tell you? I'm going to visit

Anne in California. The bus leaves in forty-five minutes."

"That's why we came," Kyle sighed, "to convince you to let me pay your plane fare. That long bus trip would be much too hard for you, Aunt Kate."

"Thank you Kyle, but I can handle it perfectly well and you need to save your money for that new transmitter. Now let's have a drink before my taxi arrives." Kate led the way into the kitchen and poured three glasses of lemonade.

"But Aunt Kate..." Kyle began to protest.

"Kyle, I'd like to talk to you," Meg interrupted as she took his hand and pulled him out onto the porch. "I know you care a great deal for Kate, but by doing too much for her, you could rob her of her self-respect. She doesn't want to think of herself as a burden to anyone. It's her independence that keeps her young and vital."

Kyle walked to the front steps and gazed at the vast desert mesa. "I know that what you're saying is true, but to me, loving someone implies doing everything you can to see to their welfare. I'm close to getting my down payment on the transmitter, but so what? If I had to, I'd get by with the one we have for another year."

"But because Kate loves you, that's the last thing she'd want." Meg paused. "She has the right to show her love for you, too."

"Good point," he conceded, turning to face her. "Thanks, Meg. I'm glad you're here. You're a good ally, as well as a good friend."

A warm sense of belonging swept over her. Then, just as suddenly, panic set in. She was not a part of Kyle's family. It was dangerous to delude herself by pretending otherwise. "You can always count on my friendship, Kyle," she said finally.

He started to speak, then changed his

mind. Wordlessly he walked back into the kitchen. "Okay, Aunt Kate. Tell me how I can help you get ready."

"Everything's done, except I didn't get a chance to bring down the summer quilts from the attic."

"We'll take care of it," Kyle replied with a smile.

The blast of a car horn interrupted them. "There's my cab," Kate said quickly. "I'd better get going." She gave them both quick good-bye kisses.

Kyle returned to the table and sipped his drink after she left. "If I don't go to the attic and get those quilts down today, I'm going to forget all about it. Would you like to go up there with me?"

"Of course," Meg smiled as she followed him into the hall.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Kyle switched on a light. He inserted a key in the door, pushed the door open and stepped cautiously inside. "It's just like I thought—a little musty from being closed up, but perfectly clean." He glanced around and spotted a trunk. "I bet the quilts are inside that."

Meg rubbed her nose. The attic was clean, but the air was stale. She unlocked the window and pulled it up as far as it would go. Fresh air wafted inside.

"Turn on the attic light, will you?" Kyle asked. "It's getting dark in here now that the sun is setting."

As she reached for the cord dangling from the bulb in the center of the ceiling, a gust of wind swept inside and slammed the door shut with a loud bang.

Startled, Meg jumped, snapping the cord. Instantly they were encased in darkness.

Kyle swore softly. "I forgot one detail about this attic. If you don't prop the door open when you open the window, the slightest wind slams it shut. Unfortunately it usually trips the locking mechanism. To get out, you either need

someone outside with a key, or you have to take the hinges off. But just in case somebody fixed it, I'll give it a try anyway."

She heard him trying to pull the door open. "Damn, it's locked tight." He fell silent for a few seconds. "No light, no key, no one outside. I can't remove the hinges until it's light again outside. I think we're in trouble."

"My eyes have adjusted a bit," Meg said sitting, "but it's still too dark to see anything but vague shadows."

"I know. You're not afraid of the dark, are you?"

She laughed. "No. Like the old joke says, I'm more afraid of what's *in* the dark."

"In this case, it's only me." He paused. "Then, again, maybe that's been the problem all along."

Meg leaned back against something solid. "It's not you, Kyle. It's me. I know that."

"I just don't understand why you're so afraid of love," he said wearily. "Love isn't something to be afraid of."

"Maybe not for you, but in my experience it is."

"Help me to understand you, Meg, please."

In the darkness it was easier to talk. Wrapping her arms around her raised knees, she said, "Loving someone makes me too weak. It was my eagerness to please Mike that always got me into trouble. He'd take me in his arms, and I'd be lost. He'd make me feel safe and loved, and in return I'd do just about anything he asked. The more I gave, the more he took."

"Not every man loves in the same way Mike did."

"Oh, come on, Kyle. Are you telling me that if you and I were"—she couldn't bring herself to say the words *in love*—"having a relationship, you

wouldn't start making demands on me?"

"Of course I would, and you'd make them on me, too. But real love isn't selfish, Meg. I would never ask you to become what I want at the expense of being who you are. It's like you told me downstairs when I wanted to pay for Aunt Kate's ticket. Real love bestows the most precious gift of all—the freedom to be yourself."

Meg swallowed, remembering her own words and the way he had responded to them. Mike and Kyle were not the same. So why couldn't she put the past behind her?

She heard him moving about. "What are you doing?"

"The least I can do is close the window. I can find that easily enough by tracking the source of the breeze." Within a few minutes he worked his way back toward her. Gently he placed his coat around her shoulders. "Here. At least you can wear this."

"I'll tell you what," Meg said. "You keep your coat on, put your arms over me, and we'll cuddle. Your body heat will keep me warm enough."

"Great idea," he said enthusiastically. Kyle slipped his jacket back on, then held one side open so that she could nestle against him. "This room was made for daydreams," he said pensively. "Yet all the dreams woven here appear destined to remain out of my grasp."

"I..." The words became lodged in her throat, but she struggled to speak. "You're special to me, Kyle. I don't know what lies ahead for us, but I want you to know that I really care for you."

"I've known that for a long time."

He kissed her then, teasing her until her lips were as soft and hungry as he wanted them to be. He entwined his hands in her hair, drawing it away from her face as his tongue plundered the depths of her, seeking to master her senses as well as her

heart.

His mouth remained on hers as he ran his hands over her body. Meg felt reality fade, and nothing save the electric sensations coursing through her seemed to matter.

"I want you to be mine completely tonight, Meg. I don't want you to be afraid, or to think of anyone or anything except me."

His words touched her very heart. "You're asking for what you already have," she said simply.

He rose suddenly and stepped away from her and took two homemade patchwork quilts from the trunk. He laid one on the floor, then unfolded the other over it to serve as a blanket.

His eyes met Meg's as he walked back toward her. "It's not elegant, but tonight all we need is each other."

The raw timbre of his voice spoke of dark, driving passion, and a tenderness born of love. She followed him back to the quilts and began to undress.

"No," he murmured. "Let me."

She became entranced as a sweet weakness invaded her. His fingers brushed against her hot flesh, searing her skin as he divested her of her garments. Her blouse slipped to the floor, and her skirt followed. With each revelation came a new torment. Kyle's lips sampled every inch of her flesh, tasting, probing, and branding her with the fire of his love. "You're breathtaking by moonlight," he whispered.

She melted into his arms, his chest firm against her cheek. "I want to make love to you. I want it to be a night that we'll never forget."

"It already is."

Meg awoke to find Kyle removing the attic door from its hinges. Her eyes strayed over his well-muscled back which she had caressed so feverishly the night

before. Would their present relationship be enough for him, she wondered as the old doubts once again assailed her.

"Good morning. I know what you're thinking, Meg," Kyle said slowly.

Her eyes widened. "You do?"

"You're worried that after what happened last night, I'm going to try and trap you into accepting my demands." He gave her a level look. "I'm not."

"I'm going to need some time to get used to this, to us." Meg smiled sheepishly. "Let's take it slowly, okay?"

"Okay. Let's have some coffee. Then I can put the door back and then," he paused, "I'm afraid I have to go to the station and work on the books with my accountant. I wish I could spend the day with you," he said sadly.

"There will be other days," Meg promised.

The week passed quickly and suddenly it was the Friday before the big KHAY-KLUV softball game, and Meg had a lot on her mind. Mostly, she was worried about Kyle. He'd been working past the point of exhaustion. In addition to his regular work, he'd been spending every extra minute trying to raise more advertising revenue. He had applied for a bank loan to get the rest of the down payment for the new transmitter and wanted to present the best possible financial picture to the bank officials. So far, no decision had been made and Meg worried about that, too.

She also wondered who John Taylor was and why he'd been trying to reach her. He'd left a message with Kate last night, and another one that morning. Back in Kyle's office after their shift, Meg decided to call John Taylor.

"I represent station KBOY in Texas, and I'd like to talk to you about coming to work for us," he told her.

"I'm familiar with your station," Meg said in surprise. "You have one of the

largest radio audiences in the Southwest. But how did you ever hear about me?"

"Luckily we managed to obtain a tape of several of your shows, and we liked what we heard," Taylor answered smoothly. "What do you say to meeting me to discuss the job offer?"

Meg considered only briefly before answering, "Thanks, but I have a job, and I'm happy here."

"Don't make up your mind right away," he countered. "I'm not certain what you make at KHAY, but I think our offer will probably be almost twice as much." The figure he mentioned was, indeed, extremely generous.

Meg's eyebrows rose. "You're kidding!"

"Not at all," he replied. "You're a valuable radio personality. Are you interested?"

"I don't know," she said hesitantly. The salary she was being offered was three times her current one, and working for a station like KBOY in Texas was bound to put her back at the top of her career field.

"Tell you what," he pressed. "If you're free, why don't I come over to the station right now and take you to lunch. I'd really like to discuss this some more with you."

"What was that all about?" Kyle asked, entering the office as Meg hung up the phone.

She told him what John Taylor had offered her.

Kyle whistled. "I could never match that."

"I know."

"It would be your chance to make it really big as a deejay. I can't offer you fame either. My station's too small. I think you owe it to yourself to seriously consider KBOY's offer," he said.

His reaction puzzled her. Why was he being so magnanimous? Didn't he want her to stay? "I'm having lunch with John

Taylor," she told Kyle. "I'll see what else he has to say."

Kyle sat down at his desk and began sorting through a large stack of papers, his attention apparently not at all on her problem.

"I don't understand you," she said at length. "Why aren't you more upset at the prospect that I might be leaving? Doesn't it matter to you at all if I take the job and move away?"

He stood to walk over to her chair and pulled her up into his arms. His eyes bore into hers with burning intensity. "You mean a great deal to me, Meg. I think you know that. That's why I won't stand in your way. I can always travel to Texas and see you, if that's the way it turns out. But to keep you from doing what you want with your life"—he held out his hands, palms up—"that isn't love, sweetheart. I care enough for you to let you become whatever you want to be."

Meg left his office feeling more confused than ever before. Kyle's unselfishness had touched her deeply. It was exactly the kind of thing Mike would never have done for her.

"Hi, Meg!" A familiar voice interrupted her thoughts, and she glanced up at a short, stylishly dressed businessman who must be John Taylor. "I recognized you from your promotional photos," he said. "They don't do you justice. Are you ready for lunch?"

Taking a deep breath, Meg turned to face him. "Mr. Taylor, I'm afraid I'm going to have to break our lunch date. You see, I've decided not to accept your offer after all."

"But you haven't even heard all of it yet!" he said.

"That doesn't matter. KHAY more than fills my needs. I want to stay because I'm happy here. Money alone would never compensate for what I'd be losing if I left."

"That's your final decision?"

"I'm afraid it is." She shook hands with him. "I'm sorry," she said as she walked him to his car.

"So am I," he replied. "If you ever change your mind, give me a call." He handed her his business card.

"I won't change my mind, but thanks, anyway."

When she walked back into the station, she ran directly into Kyle.

"I thought you were leaving with Taylor."

"I changed my mind about lunch. And I turned down the job."

"You turned him down?"

Meg looked at him, standing a few feet away. He had never looked better—tall, handsome, with earnest anticipation shimmering in his eyes. "Yes, I did."

With a loud whoop he sprang toward her, picked her up in his arms, and swung her around. "That's terrific!"

With a totally uninhibited squeal of delight, she wound her arms tightly around his neck. His obvious joy in her decision was worth all the money in the world.

On Saturday nearly the whole town turned out for the softball game. Kyle was elated. Meg was terrified. Even though Kyle had given her some batting practice, she knew she was hopelessly inadequate as a player.

Meg's worst nightmares became reality in the bottom half of the third inning. The score was tied at three-three, and it was her turn to bat.

Meg kept her eyes on the ball, then swung the bat, putting all her strength into it. She actually hit the ball! But as she ran toward first base, she saw the pitcher catch the ball in midair. She was out. Unfortunately she didn't fare much better the next time she was up at bat.

The rest of the team was doing well,

though, much better than expected. When they entered the last inning, KHAY was ahead, seven-six.

Her complacency was shattered when the first KLUV batter hit a line drive just over first base. The ball bounced off the ground, then, to her dismay, arched right over her head. She was trying to reach the ball when Kyle leaped into the air, snagged the ball in his glove, and hurled it back toward second base.

The crowd cheered, and Kyle's teammates praised his quick action. "One down, two to go," Kyle called out to his team.

Meg's eyes came to rest on Monica as she stepped up to the plate. Meg watched as she made it to first base safely with a walk. At least Meg had been spared trying to scramble for a ball determined to elude her.

Meg remained close behind the first baseman, forgetting to move back into position as the next player came to the plate. With a loud crack the ball shot directly at her. Instinctively she put her hand in front of her face, and something hard thumped into her glove.

Realizing that by some miracle she had managed to catch the ball, she reached out quickly with her right hand and grabbed the ball before it fell.

Kyle was running up from behind her, shouting something. "Tag Monica!" he yelled. "She's off base!"

Focusing on what he was saying, she tried to cut Monica off before she could dart back to safety. Meg lunged forward. Reaching as far as she could, she jumped toward Monica, holding the ball in a white-knuckled death grip.

When the dust cleared, Monica was lying on the ground, sputtering, first base just beyond the grasp of her outstretched arms.

Kyle picked Meg up, pulled her into a powerful bear hug, and twirled her

around ecstatically. "You did it, Meg! A double play! We've won!"

"Don't we bat now?" Meg asked.

"We don't have to. We were already ahead. The game's over, sweetheart. We've won!" he repeated.

A moment later the crowd was streaming onto the playing field.

"Way to go, Kyle," a man cheered. "Who'd have thought our town's favorite son and his new partner would save the game!"

"You two are the best thing that's happened to this town," a voice told them from off to their right.

The high school coach who had acted as their umpire reached the official's table and turned on the loudspeaker. "Folks, our volunteers have just informed me that this game has collected even more money than we anticipated. We have enough to buy color television sets for the hospital's children's ward, as well as the funds to replace the old furniture in the parents' waiting room."

A loud cheer went up, and more congratulations came pouring in. An individual whom they both recognized as the station's banker pushed his way toward them. "Congratulations on your victory," he said, presenting his hand to shake. "Your station is becoming a real asset to the community." He stepped forward and whispered briefly in Kyle's ear, then excused himself.

"What did he say, Kyle? Was it about the loan?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Well, did we get the loan or not?" she demanded.

"Yes," Kyle murmured. "We did." His arms curved around her waist as his lips brushed hers in a light kiss. "Thank you, sweetheart, for coming into my life," he whispered as the crowd clamored around them.

After all the borrowed baseball equip-

ment had been returned to the staff of J. Edgar Hoover High School, Meg walked with Kyle back to the parking lot. "I don't think I'll ever forget today," she said.

He opened the car door for her. "Why don't you let me fix you a drink over at my home? It's not far from here, and it will be hours before the celebration party at Aunt Kate's begins." His eyes met hers in intimate communication. "This has been such a fantastic day. I want to share the afternoon with you. After all, you're the one who made it happen for me."

"I'd be delighted," she said simply.

Twenty minutes later Meg met Kyle at his house. She followed him in and waited in the living room.

"I had this chilled just for the occasion," he said, returning with a bottle of champagne. "I bought a case for the party tonight."

"Cocky, aren't you?" she teased.

Kyle struggled with the cork. Suddenly, without warning, it popped loudly out of the bottle and the foamy, bubbly liquid spurted all over them.

"You need a bath," he said, his eyes drifting over her in a slow, lingering appraisal.

She smiled. "So do you." She circled his waist with her arms and looked up into his face.

He began to unbutton her white cotton top, but Meg stepped back. "We're not even near the shower yet."

"Are you afraid to stand naked before me, here, in the full light of day?" he drawled.

In answer she lifted both her hands to her buttons and began unfastening them one by one.

Kyle took a step toward her, but she moved back. Unclasping her jeans, then slipping out of her undergarments, she stood brazenly before him, confident in the knowledge that they belonged to each

other.

Kyle came toward her. "There's no need to rush," she said in a soft, seductive voice. She undressed him slowly, enjoying the feel of his naked flesh beneath her fingertips. "You're so masculine," she whispered. "It makes me glad that I'm a woman."

"I love you, Meg," he said in a throaty voice that seemed to be torn from the depths of his soul. He pulled her to him, crushing her in his arms.

The wild need that drove him communicated itself to her, drawing her heart to him. "I love you, Kyle."

He tore his lips from the hollow of her throat, pushing away to look into her eyes. "Meg, do you know what you just said?"

She nodded. "I love you, Kyle."

"Then there's no escape for either of us. We're a team on and off the air, because now that you've said it, there'll be no turning back."

With a sigh she buried her head against his chest. "Let's go take a long, hot shower," she said.

"Yes, let's." He lifted her against his body and carried her into the shower enclosure. Adjusting the nozzle, he allowed the steaming liquid to assault their bodies.

The spray stung them as their mouths met in a hungry reunion. "This is the way I want you, Meg—holding nothing back, completely mine."

As his maleness engulfed her, she offered all of herself to him. In a blaze of unequaled passion, they were lifted beyond the boundaries of the flesh and soared to a universe of dreams...

Long moments later, Kyle tenderly rinsed her body off, then allowed her to do the same for him.

"Of course, now there's only one thing left to do," he said seriously.

"You want me to serve you hand and

foot by going to get the towels," she said with mock resignation.

Kyle laughed as he stepped out of the shower. "No." His expression grew serious again. "Meg"—he wrapped one of the towels around her and pulled her against him—"marry me."

The words shocked her.

"I don't know," she said, stiffening and pulling away. "I have to think, Kyle. And I have to do that somewhere away from you."

Her towel around her, she went to the living room. Meg picked up her clothes from the floor and dressed.

Kyle followed her. "You're running away again," he noted ruefully.

"Not really. I'll be with you at Kate's in a few hours. Just give me a little time to think about what you've said." Trying to reassure him, she kissed him lightly. "Kyle, I do love you. Please believe that."

Not giving him a chance to answer, she hurried out the front door.

Meg drove aimlessly for a long time. Marriage? She had grown to realize that Kyle's demands stemmed from love, not from selfishness. But they were demands just the same. Could she fulfill his needs without sacrificing her own?

Her mind whirled in confusion. Perhaps she needed diversion. The party wouldn't begin for a couple of hours. Remembering that the script for "Nightly" needed final revision, Meg headed for the station.

She parked near the rear entrance. Using her key, she entered the building and walked to Kyle's office. But the script wasn't there. Out of desperation she opened Kyle's top drawer. As she did, her eyes came to rest on a small rectangular box. A card with her name on it had been attached to it.

She carefully lifted the lid. In the center lay a gold heart, the twin to the one she

and Kyle had buried. But this one had a different inscription:

*To Meg, the lady who stole my heart
Kyle*

Meg recalled the first time she had seen the two hearts at the Santa Fe goldsmith's shop. She had raved about them, wishing she could have purchased the remaining one. Kyle had remembered, and had obviously gone back and bought it for her as a token of his love.

The gesture touched her deeply. With sudden, alarming clarity she realized that his demands would not be demands at all. They'd be a part of what she'd give freely because of her love for him.

Feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

Sitting up abruptly, Meg saw that the sun was visible just above the windowsill. She gasped. She had slept all night in Kyle's chair and missed their victory celebration! Not only that, but she had managed to miss the first fifteen minutes of their show according to her watch.

Meg ran to the booth and arrived just as Kyle was addressing their listeners. "And here she is, ladies and gentlemen, looking as bright and fresh as a wilted daisy. What the heck happened to you?"

Meg put on her headphones, then switched on her microphone. "After you thoroughly confused me last night, I went for a long drive."

"And you slept in my office," he finished.

"How did you know?"

"When you failed to show up for the party, I called the nighttime deejay. He saw your car in the parking lot. I peeked in this morning, but you looked so peaceful I decided not to wake you. What were you doing in there, anyway?"

"I was looking for our script of 'Night-

ly.' But I couldn't find it, so I looked in your desk."

"I see. You were being nosy."

"I found the heart."

Kyle laughed. "Lady, you've had it all along."

"Folks, let me tell you about the present this wonderful man bought for me," she said. She recounted the story of how they had found the two hearts, and how she hadn't had the money to purchase the remaining one.

"But I don't understand," Kyle said.

"If you liked it as much as you say, why aren't you wearing it now?"

"I don't want to be pushy. I thought I'd wait until you gave the heart to me—officially, that is."

The station secretary suddenly walked into the sound booth and handed Kyle the box. "Folks, our secretary, who also goes through my desk, has just brought me the heart. I am now officially placing this around Meg's neck."

"It sounds like strangulation," Meg shot back. "Try a little sweet talk, Romeo."

"How about you people out there giving me a hand? What can I say to Meg that will sweep her off her feet?"

"Tell her you're madly in love with her," one caller suggested.

"Tell her she means everything to you," said another.

Kyle looked at her, his eyes never wavering. "Would any of those work?"

"I like most what you said to me yesterday. How about repeating the question?" she suggested.

Kyle reached across the booth and held her hand. "Will you marry me?"

Meg swallowed. "Yes."

"If you'll excuse us for just a moment," Kyle told the listeners. He removed his headset, then gently pulled off hers. He stood up and offering his hand, helped her to her feet. "So the team

of Rager and Randall ends."

"But the partnership of Rager and Rager is just beginning."

Then his mouth was on hers, hot, demanding and indescribably tender. "I love you," he told her again and again as he covered her face with kisses.

Meg fitted herself against his body. "I'll do everything I can to make you happy, Kyle, I promise."

"You already have," he said thickly.

"This is sweet," said T.J., interrupting on the newscasters' microphone, "but do

you realize you're broadcasting over the air? I hate to ruin this tender moment, but the whole town's listening."

Meg stared aghast at the live microphone. Before she could recover the switchboard lights all began to glow.

"And now for the grand finale, folks," Kyle informed their listeners. "T.J.'s going to take over for us. My bride-to-be and I have wedding plans to make."

As music filled the airwaves, Kyle again took Meg in his arms. "Where were we?" he murmured as his lips covered hers. ♥

It's Not Enough Just To Have Your Blood Pressure Checked.

If it's high, you have to stay on your medication to keep it under control. Some 34 million Americans have high blood pressure, but only half of them know it. And of those who know it's high, more than half of them don't have it under control. Left uncontrolled, high blood pressure may lead to stroke, heart attack or kidney failure.

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Enduring Love

Smart, sophisticated, Washington-born-and-bred Loren Randolph resists giving up her world for that of Reid Mecena, the brash son of an Arizonian senator. But memories and passion, and enduring love, all conspire against her.

—TATE McKENNA—

Loren gazed around the ancient room as she and her fiance made their way to a table. She could never enter the Seaport Inn without thinking of *him*.

"Ah, this is perfect, isn't it, darling? Excellent view of the Potomac." Mark helped her with her chair. "See what you've missed by refusing to come here?"

"Yes, it's lovely, Mark."

"Would you like Chablis?"

She nodded absently. "Chablis sounds fine."

They toasted each other and exchanged small talk, but mostly spent the time gazing out the window to admire the view. They sipped their wine, and Loren smiled to herself, remembering her times here with her former lover, Reid Mecena. Although it had been over six years since they'd broken up, she could never enter this restaurant without remembering the handsome Senator's son. Even her upcoming marriage with Mark, which she had postponed twice already, hadn't

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distracted her from memories of him.

Oh, dear God, I've got to stop this! she thought, gulping her wine and turning her gaze across the room.

Her gaze suddenly stopped and her breath caught in her throat. There he was! Their eyes locked for a second that seemed like a lifetime before she turned away. Her thoughts were wild and jumbled as her blood pumped through her veins. *But, it couldn't be! Not after all this time. Six years of trying to forget. And now I see him again. How much wine did I have? Why do I feel so crazy?*

With a shaky hand she lifted the glass to her lips. Then her eyes, drawn like a magnet, sought that same table where Reid sat with two other men. His profile was in her line of vision now, and she examined him carefully, curiously. This man was different, but somehow the same. Dark, unruly hair, penetrating, almost-black eyes, squared shoulders crammed into a suede jacket. And those *godawful scuffy cowboy boots!* The mustache was what made his face look different. He turned and watched her again, his eyes catching hers. With jerky motions she set her wine on the table and scooted her chair back.

"Excuse me, please, Mark."

"Certainly, darling. Are you all right?"

She nodded and tried to smile. "I'll be right back." Loren carefully avoided the dark stare from across the room as she made her way quickly to the ladies' room.

Once inside, she slumped against the wall, taking deep, gulping breaths to try and calm her heaving stomach.

Then, she began to laugh. Hysterically, wildly, until the laughter dissolved into tears that flowed down both cheeks. She grabbed a paper towel and wet it, dabbing at the smeared mascara under her eyes. She gaped at her reflection. Pale-cheeked, red-eyed, stricken.

Taking her time, Loren repaired her makeup. What was Reid doing here, so

far away from Arizona? And why would he come to this particular restaurant? Why, for that matter, did she and Mark come here tonight? She wished a thousand times over she had never agreed to it!

Taking a deep breath, Loren smoothed her skirt and stepped out into the dark hallway, momentarily blinded in the dim light. A hand shot out and grasped her wrist, pulling her against a solid male body. Alarmed, she prepared to scream. But something prevented it.

His voice. . . "Loren, Loren—"

She gazed up. "*Reid!*"

Loren gasped audibly, then, with more composure than she could ever dream possible, muttered, "Excuse me, please." She tried to move away from him.

But his hand did not loosen its grip. "Loren! Loren, thank God, it's you! I wasn't sure for a minute."

Frantically she looked into his familiar eyes, the eyes of an intimate stranger. "Please, leave me alone!" she begged.

Anguish instantly shot across his face. "I can't! Loren, I must talk to you."

"No! Please, Reid, don't do this to me!"

His voice was tight. "Loren, I don't understand. Do you mean that you don't want to see me? Don't you have any feelings? I have to know how you are. . . what you're doing!"

Loren finally jerked her arm free. "For all you care, I could be dead by now! Will you please move so I can pass?"

"Loren. Do you still live at the same place?"

She turned her head away, trying not to give him any information. . . trying not to care.

His voice was a low rumble, so familiar yet so distant. "Do you still live in the sea captain's house where the Hessian soldier made love to the captain's wife? The house where we made love, Loren?"

Unable to avoid his gaze, Loren turned

back to Reid's sad eyes. "Yes," she whispered hoarsely.

"Can I see you there?"

For some unknown, uncontrollable reason, she nodded. Her head moved of its own accord, imperceptibly. No words were spoken between them for long seconds as each was caught in the magic of the attraction that still existed, after all the years that had passed. Loren knew she was betraying herself. *Again*. But she had to see him again too. Just this once.

Reid's hand touched her shoulder, and warmth flooded through her. "I don't want to disturb your evening any more than I already have, so please return to your table. I won't ask for an introduction. I'm afraid I might punch the man in the nose."

She smiled for the first time since seeing him, responding to his once-familiar banter.

"Loren, when can I come?"

She shrugged, her eyes saying a million things.

"Tonight?"

Loren nodded. "Yes, but give me a little time." *Why? Why was she doing this to herself?*

"See you later. In about an hour." His promise was a whisper, and Loren stumbled back to the table where Mark sat, disturbed.

"I almost sent the waitress in to see if you were all right."

"Sorry, Mark. I—I ran into an old . . . friend."

Mark motioned toward her plate. "Try your crab imperiale before it gets cold, dear."

Loren attempted to eat, but the creamy fare knotted in her stomach. Every time she glanced across the room, Reid's eyes were on her. Totally unnerved, Loren claimed that she didn't feel well and was ready to leave.

Miffed, Mark whisked her home in a

matter of minutes. He crammed the key into the lock and stood aside for her to enter before him.

But Loren placed her hand on his arm and said, "Don't come in with me tonight, Mark."

"Loren, are you sick?"

She shook her head. "It's just a headache. I have a lot on my mind. It's . . . it's a tough court case next week."

His hazel eyes snapped at her. "You and those damned liberated women's cases! When are you going to get smart and work for some decent clients?"

Instantly Loren bristled. "These *are* decent clients! Just because they don't have the money yours do—"

"Oh, Loren, you know what I mean. These women seem to leave themselves open for the problems they have. They keep going back to the same damn man who beat them up month after month. Or return to the jackass who chased every skirt he saw. They deserve what they get!"

Loren was shaking with anger. "There's no excuse for what some of my clients have endured!"

His hands grasped her forearms. "I'm not offering excuses. I'm trying to get you to see how futile your job is."

Loren sighed and lowered her voice. "Look, Mark, I'm not going to stand here defending my legal practice. Nor will I argue women's rights tonight."

Ruefully he backed down. "I'm sorry, darling. You know I'm as strong an advocate of women's rights as anyone. It's just that I wanted you all to myself this weekend. I'm disappointed."

She touched his cheek. "I'm sorry, Mark."

He shrugged. "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow night. Goodnight my love."

As she entered the house was cool, but she didn't even think to turn up the thermostat. She just sat on the sofa, hugging a heavy afghan around her. She felt excited

and scared, sensitive and paralyzed, all at once.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but the bold, dark vision loomed in her mind, and Loren could almost feel Reid's breath on her face and hear his low mumbling of her name. Reid had looked older, more mature, with a little gray mingled with the dark hair at his temples. Well, he must be about thirty-five now. The lines beside his cheeks were deeper etched, and she wondered about the dimple that hid in his left cheek. He was still lean and western and wore his jacket as though he were on the verge of discarding it.

Oh, God! What if... he didn't show up? Just like six years ago. Sinking back into the depths of the sofa, Loren resigned herself to the idea. She had managed adequately alone for years. But she hadn't looked into those eyes. Loren thought she couldn't stand the idea of Reid being in Washington and not seeing her. There was no telling how many times he had been here and not bothered to look her up.

A car turned the corner and pulled to a practiced stop in front of her walk.

Taking a deep, ragged sigh, Loren gathered an afghan around her. Then she was there, opening the door, facing him.

She looked so lovely, so vulnerable, so achingly proud to Reid. Her tawny hair, shorter than before, barely reached her shoulders. Her eyes were the same, more intense perhaps, as when they had laughingly made love in a field of bluebonnets. Her lips and neck and arms were tense—begging for his touch—yet holding back from him. He wanted to caress her, to crush her to him! But did he dare?

There was a lightness in his tone. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

Loren smiled faintly, then stepped back to admit him.

As Reid stepped in, he was suddenly overwhelmed with the sights and smells

around him. He was back! *Deja vu!* This was where he belonged! He knew he couldn't leave her ever... ever again. He gazed at her upturned face and immediately Loren was propelled into his arms. His lips devoured her while a low moan escaped from deep inside him. Finally, after an eternity of memories, he released her, murmuring, "Loren, oh, my God, how I've missed you."

Loren stumbled back. "Reid, don't—"

He ran his hand raggedly over his face. "I'm sorry, Loren. I just couldn't resist you. I don't know how I stayed away so long."

"I don't know either." Her voice was a hoarse whisper, and she turned away.

Reid stuffed his hands into his pockets and glanced around the room. He began to walk around, stopping to touch a lamp or wall hanging. Some were things they had purchased together while rummaging in antique shops or browsing through galleries. But he didn't mention that. He didn't have to. They both knew. He gazed at Loren finally, with great contentment written on his face. "Some things never change. It's just as I remembered."

"But people do," she responded sadly.

"Yes," he admitted. "And people keep living, doing what they have to do. Only you look... the same. Perhaps lovelier. The years have been good to you, Loren."

She smiled bitterly, wondering why she wasn't gray and bent with all the sadness she'd held inside during that time. Did she dare tell him how hard the years—and life without him—had been? "I just did what was necessary to keep going all these years. I'm sure they took their toll."

He smiled slightly and white teeth flashed against his tanned face. "It doesn't show. You're lovely."

"The scars are all inside."

"Loren—" he implored. "It was tough on me too."

"But, what do you expect, Reid? Do you honestly believe that we can pick up where we left off—six years ago?"

He swallowed hard, knowing she was right...and terribly hurt. As if he couldn't stand the intensity of the moment, he changed the subject. "It's cool in here. I'll get the heat." He walked confidently to the hall and adjusted the thermostat. "How about a cup of tea? Then we can talk."

Loren sat down on the sofa, feet curled under her, watching Reid. She found herself enjoying the sight of him puttering in the yellow kitchen, as he had done so many times in the past. Oh, God, it had been a long time. Six years! Six heartbroken, hard-working, life-building years for her. And now, how dare he step back into her life? How could he think he had that right? And how in the world could she allow him in? Was she absolutely crazy? Things were going too well to disrupt her life now. There would be only one reason that would merit the discordance a relationship with Reid would surely create. Only one. *If their love was strong enough.* But, Loren wondered, could she relent to love?

Moments later Reid set a tray carefully on the table before her, sat down, and turned to her. "I've missed you, Loren..." He moved closer, overwhelming her with his fragrance. It had been so long.

His kiss was gentle this time, soothing and loving. *Loving?* But Loren pulled back. She had to.

She drew in a shaky breath. "Please, Reid..."

He shifted away from her, feeling her reluctance yet confused by her varied reactions. Sighing, Reid gulped the hot, spicy brew from his mug. "It's been a long time since I've had this flavor tea."

She sipped delicately, feeling better as the warmth spread through her. "Why?

Won't your wife prepare it for you?"

His dark eyes cut into her. "Tea wasn't my former wife's type of drink. Scotch was more to her liking."

Loren raised her eyebrows. "Former wife? I see we have a lot of catching up to do."

He answered honestly. "Yes, we do. I just hope you'll give me a chance to explain. I realize we can't just pick up where we left off, but could we try to understand each other?" His voice was almost a plea.

She smiled longingly. "We can try." She reached for his face, just to touch it, caress it, run her fingers along the lines, and touch his hair. "I... I've missed you, too, Reid. And you know something funny? At first I wasn't sure it was you in the restaurant tonight. It was almost like a dream." Her hand fell away, and suddenly she felt shy with him.

Reid's tone was soft and serious. "Loren, I want you to know that through it all I have never forgotten you or the love we shared. You have always been in my memory. Always. And when I saw you tonight, I knew I had to talk to you...to hold you again. Just once more. Can you understand that?"

She nodded, muttering thickly, "Of course."

He kissed her forehead. "And you are the same as in my memory."

She sighed. "I won't deny what we shared, but we have both changed. We lead entirely different lives now. I—I'm not the same innocent young girl I was six years ago. This year I'll be twenty-nine. And I won't let you manipulate me as you did then."

His voice was rough. "Was it so bad, Loren?"

"The leaving was."

"That was a mistake. I sensed it then; I know it now. I was wrong to leave you, but my life just seemed to cave in around me and..."

"Your father? How is he? We heard about his stroke."

Reid grimaced. "It's been very difficult for a man who was once so active. Now he's confined to a wheelchair, and that's tough. But he's doing fairly well, considering."

"How do you handle him?"

"Oh, I have help at the ranch," Reid admitted gratefully. "I could never get along without Lupe and Raul. They help me run the ranch and take care of father."

"Do you mean you're not a Senator from Arizona yet? Not filling his shoes?" she teased.

He chuckled, embarrassed that she should touch on the very timely subject. "No, not yet. Right now I just manage the ranch's business."

"A gentleman rancher? How nice."

Reid's hands became expressive. "It's the life I really love, Loren. I have freedom, open spaces, and enough to keep me busy and in tune to people and what's going on in my state."

"Your state? How quaint!" She chuckled.

Reid laughed with her. "I see you're still spirited, Loren. And you haven't lost the ability to excite me like no other woman."

"Like no other?" There was acid in her tone. "What kind of fool do you think I am? You were married! Someone excited you then!"

His answer to her was low-toned. "I was married for two miserable years. It was sort of a land acquisition marriage, with two powerful ranch families joining. It had been arranged for years. And I thought it might work. Believe me, Loren, there was never any love—never anything like what you and I shared here in Washington that year."

She gave him a doubtful look. "Please don't!"

"It's true, Loren. But what about you?"

Are you—" The obvious question was avoided as he lifted her left hand, running his fingers around the sparkling, sizable rock that graced her third finger. "What's this?"

"I'm engaged," she answered reluctantly.

"To the man I saw you with tonight?"

She nodded silently.

His voice was tight. "Do you love him?" Then, after a heavy silence, "Do you sleep with him?"

She sat the cup and saucer on the coffee table with a clatter, and stood up. Anger shook her voice. "I don't think it's any of your business!"

He was instantly beside her, his hand on her wrist, as if feeling her wildly racing pulse. "I have to know! Is it any good with him? As good as we had it?"

"Damn you, Reid Mecena! What the hell are you trying to do? Did you sleep with your wife? Was it 'good'?" Loren was dangerously close to tears. "Have you slept with a hundred women since? Would you tell me the truth?"

His voice was low and strained, and she could hear his ragged breathing. "I'll tell you the truth. It was never as good as with you." His hands grasped her forearms. "Never, do you understand? I could never get you out of my mind! I tried! Oh, God, did I try!" His mouth was set in a thin line as he pulled her closer. "Tell me, Loren, was it as good? Was it ever as good?"

Loren's blue eyes filled with tears as she looked up at him, knowing she was once again opening her heart, her life, for love's pain. Her voice was low and hoarse. "No, Reid. Never."

"Oh, Loren, how I've longed to hear you say that! Oh, God, don't marry him! I want you so..." His kiss was fierce as he pulled her powerfully to him. At that moment Loren never wanted to be out of his arms and free again. Being free would mean being without Reid. And, dear

God, she couldn't stand that again.

Finally, breathlessly, he raised his head, raining kisses over her eyelids and cheeks and earlobes and neck.

Painfully she tore away. "Please, Reid, give me time."

"Time for what?"

"I... I don't know," she gasped. "I just..."

Resigned, he dropped his hands to his sides. "All right. Let's give ourselves time. But what we once shared is still there. You know it as well as I do. Don't fight it." He ambled into the kitchen and picked up his jacket, hooking it over his shoulder.

Loren stared, the events of the evening flashing before her like a fast-paced movie, ending with Reid walking out her door. Again.

Oh, no!

She was beside him, her fingers digging acutely into his arm. "Don't go," Loren begged, knowing this was against all she stood for. "Please, don't go."

In the morning light, Reid's features were so familiar, yet strange; so customary, yet rare. The jet-black hair fell casually over his forehead and excessive lashes hid those devilish eyes. Her finger explored the tanned cheek, then edged his lower lip. White teeth nibbled at the soft pads on the tips of her fingers. Warm lips encased them completely. His hand riveted possessively around her bare waist, pulling her half under his aroused, male contour. He nuzzled her ear.

Suddenly she thought of Mark and felt a wave of guilt. Even though she'd postponed their marriage indefinitely and steadfastly refused to make love with him, they still were officially engaged. If only she had broken it off with him completely, as she had wanted!

"Reid—"

"What's wrong, *querida*?"

Her arms clasped automatically around his neck. "We can't continue this... this way."

"*Dios mio*, you're so right!" he groaned. "And I have the only solution to our particular problem." He caressed her rib cage, slender waist, flat belly and Mark was instantly forgotten. "Oh, God, woman! You're enough to drive a man crazy!"

Her hands dug into his shoulders fiercely. "Look... who's talking... about crazy..." she gasped.

"I want to enjoy you to the fullest, my beautiful blue-eyes!" He flipped the cover off them, "Damn, I've missed you!"

She laughed giddily at his boldness, and her own wild abandon. She had missed him too. Missed his brazen admissions, his ardent lovemaking.

"Ah, *perfeccion!*"

His fingers lightly traced her already sensitive body, tantalizing her, his admiration sending torrents of desire shooting through her.

"Easy... easy..." he admonished, his guttural chuckle full of undisguised masculine satisfaction. "I love to see you respond to me, and only me—" His dark-fire eyes sought hers, the passion obvious, the unasked question smoldering behind tight lips.

As if in answer, Loren's smile was one of extreme pleasure and untapped desire. Should she tell him that he was the only one who excited her with his touch... *the only one, ever?* "Reid, I love you to touch me like that. You make me feel so... so wanted."

"Ah, *mi amor*, you'll never know..."

His hands traveled down her silken skin, thrilling her. Reid loved her as she had not been loved for six years. Loren closed her eyes in ecstasy, glowing in the shockwaves of passion that fired her veins.

Time became endless as hot currents

charged her limbs, engulfing Loren's senses, and she followed Reid's authority and mastery eagerly and willingly. It had always been this way. He, and only he, knew how to gauge her responses and charge her to the height of her yearning. Reid's dark image had even invaded her dreams, holding and exciting her, just like this.

In a moment of frenzy Loren reached for him, arching impatiently to satiate her burning hunger. "Reid, Reid—" His name sizzled as his lips covered hers, and they were one again, lost from the real world for timeless, ecstasy-filled minutes, longing never to return.

Their bodies came together with the same furor as their kisses, all-consuming and fierce. Reid's heated force was met with Loren's eager yearning, and a volcano of fire spiraled within her as Loren felt his hands dig under her hips, pressing them even closer.

The waves of Loren's desire rose higher and higher, mounting with the rhythm that encompassed them both. An eternity of ecstasy... the feverish crest of passion... and Loren knew she was Reid's forever. Their love had endured separation and time. She would always love him. Always be his to love.

They returned to the real, sunlit world, drenched in the sweet moisture of love. Reid shifted, brushing her tumbled hair back, lightly kissing her eyelids. Loving words rumbled from deep within his chest.

Loren collapsed in a tirade of tears, silent streams of joy. Of relief. But when they fell damp against Reid's shoulder, he raised his head, alarmed.

"Loren, *preciosa*, did I hurt you?" He kissed her face tenderly.

Loren shook her head as Reid's lips continued to kiss the tears away. She smiled up at him, the remaining mist glistening in her blue eyes. "No, of course

not. I'm just so happy to have you back with me. The only time you hurt me was when you left."

The grim reminder sent a shudder through him. "Ah, Loren, *mi amor*, my beautiful blue-eyes. Never again will I leave you."

"Never? Oh, Reid, never?" Her eyes opened wide.

"I would have to be a fool, wouldn't I?"

She smiled wryly. "It happened before..."

"Okay, I was a fool once. But not twice. Our love will conquer whatever the future holds."

Loren listened and believed him, wanting with all her heart for his words to be true.

Later Reid walked around her cozy yellow kitchen with his coffee. He bent to gaze out the window into the precise, symmetrical garden. "New tree. What kind is it?"

"Cherry. The blossoms were beautiful this spring." Loren relaxed at the small round table, pleasantly content to have him poking around her home again.

"Who—" He halted, not looking at her.

"Who helped me plant it?" Loren asked, smiling. "Mark." It was an impulsive statement. Perhaps that wasn't what he was thinking at all. Maybe he didn't really care who helped her. Why had she even said it? She could have bitten her tongue.

Reid pressed his lips together, continuing to amble around the sunny room. What did he expect? She was only human... and feminine... and sexy. He appeared cool, but inside he burned. It wasn't the tree-planting, or engagement ring, or quiet dinners that bothered him. It was the thought of Mark's hands inevitably on her that drove him crazy. Of the

shadows of them alone in the dark. Of the image of them entwined in that bed... *their bed*... upstairs together. Suddenly his fist crashed onto the counter.

Loren jumped.

Reid appeared as startled over his action as she was. His smoldering eyes caught hers in a fierce gaze. Then, just as quickly, it softened. "Sorry, Loren. It's just that I was... oh, hell..."

And then she was in his arms again, pressing her heart to his. They held each other for a long time, clinging to memories that were not quite lost. Neither wanted them to be forgotten. Perhaps there was still hope...

Quietly they prepared breakfast together. Loren set the table and divided the scrambled eggs on small plates decorated with yellow flowers. "What are you doing in Washington, Reid? I don't think I took the time to ask." She smiled impishly.

Reid cut them each a chunk of coffee-cake, then sat opposite her. "I'm lobbying. You know Arizona's ever-present need for water. There's to be a new bill before Congress this fall. Trouble is, half the connections I had six years ago are retired or have been voted out of office by now. It leaves me scrambling. I don't even know anybody in the Department of the Interior anymore."

Loren cut herself another square of the cake and smiled sagely. "But I do, you know. I've lived here all my life. I've seen them come and go. And I know who's in. In fact, Mark and I are attending a dinner given by the Deputy Chief of the Interior tomorrow night. I could see that you're included."

"You would do that for me?"

She reached across the table to caress his face. "You know I would, Reid. Anyway"—she smiled teasingly—"it wouldn't be a boring evening if you went."

Reid stood and refilled their coffee

cups. "You're fantastic, do you know that? What have you been doing with yourself these past years? Are you still working for the Congressman on The Hill?"

What have I been doing? she thought acridly. *Crying a lot.* Her tone was considerably lighter than her thoughts. "Oh, I've been busy. I continued as Dick Neilson's aide for another year, then started law school. After the first year, working and going to school was too much to handle, so I quit and finished on some of the money Daddy left in trust. I've been in practice for two years now."

Reid leaned back and inspected her with appraising eyes. "You're amazing!"

Loren basked in his glory, glad for some crazy reason that he approved. "I share a small practice with a friend from law school, Althea Montgomery. We specialize in women's legal problems."

He raised his eyebrows again. "Like?"

She shrugged. "Oh, desertion, physical abuse, child support, divorce, of course."

Loren felt the inevitable curtain of hostility between them, thin, but unmistakable. Suddenly she and Reid were on opposite sides of the fence. However, she always encountered this feeling from men when they discovered what she did. She was accustomed to this reaction. It's just that she expected... wanted... more understanding from Reid.

His eyes bore into her. "Fighting a personal war?"

"What's wrong, Reid? Feeling the pinch of a little guilt?" The words just slipped out.

"Hell, no! What severed our relationship six years ago left me with no guilt! Regret, maybe, but no guilt!" He was extremely defensive, and Loren knew it was her fault. She hadn't intended to put him in that position. It just happened. Her subconscious was working overtime.

With a calm, quiet voice, she said, "As

a woman, I'm interested in the injustices to other women. I'm proud that I'm able to help." She smiled. "But, I'll admit, Reid, I suppose I do relate to some of my clients. I know what it's like to be left."

Reid's angry face drew near to hers. "You also know what it's like to be loved, damn it! And I know what it's like to be refused!"

"I told you I was scared—that I just needed a little more time, but you couldn't give it to me." She glared at him. "Is that why you fell so quickly into marriage? Wanted to prove something?"

"Damn you, Loren! You know that's not the reason."

She turned away. "Well, I know what it's like to be left with the woman's burden of a relationship!"

"Woman's burden? What are you talking about?"

She turned back and looked at him coolly. "I was pregnant when you left."

"Pregnant?" The words echoed in his mind. "You were pregnant with my child and didn't tell me? Why, in God's name, not?"

"At the time you left I didn't know, actually. But within a few weeks I was sure."

"You carried my child, Loren, and didn't tell me?"

"There wasn't time."

"Time? I—I can't believe it! Why didn't you pick up the phone and call me?"

"Because I aborted at six weeks." Her voice was steady, and her blue eyes hard. She had been alone and shed many tears. But no more.

"Abortion! My God, Loren, how could you?" He stood up and grabbed her arms with such a forceful grip that, for a moment, Loren feared his strength.

As she tried to wrench free from his powerful grasp, she could feel his steady breath falling evenly on her face, while hers was an irregular rasping that caught

in her throat. Her fear was replaced with cool anger. Through clenched teeth Loren muttered, "I was all alone here in Washington. You were God-knows-where, getting ready for your big wedding when I had the miscarriage!"

Reid shook her slightly, his breath hot on her face. "Miscarriage... abortion—which was it?"

"What difference does it make?" she spat resentfully. "You didn't care what happened to me! Or our child!"

A muscle flexed across the dark cheek as Reid shoved her roughly from him. "Of course I cared!" he retorted. "Oh, Loren. You act as though you don't know me at all, when you actually know me better than any woman ever has! I... loved you! I trusted you!"

Her hands rubbed the throbbing forearms where he had gripped her. "Trust?" she stormed. "We don't know each other at all now."

"I can tell you this! If only I had known, if you had told me you were pregnant, I would have prevented any abortion!"

Loren's voice countered coldly, left that way from too many tears shed alone over the years. "No one could have prevented what happened, Reid. Even if you had been here... and cared. I told you that I miscarried, aborted naturally. I wouldn't have an abortion. *Couldn't!* Surely you realize that."

He turned to her, crumbling inside at her words. "Loren. Loren, baby, I'm sorry." He craved to comfort her, to hold her. But it was too late. She was stiff and cold in response. "I wish to God I had been here with you. More than ever, *mi amor.*"

Loren quivered inside at the sound of the old affectionate phrase. With effort she pushed his arms from her. "Please, don't Reid. It's over now. Long time over."

Then another thought struck him. "What if... what if you had been able to carry my child? Would you *ever* have let me know? My own child!"

A vengeful smile curled Loren's lips. "Oh, you bet! I would have slapped you with a paternity suit so quickly! What a lovely wedding present that would have made!"

He sighed heavily. "I wish you had. Oh, God, I wish you had. Please tell me more about it."

Loren watched him carefully, almost vindictively. After all, she had been through a lot of hell because of him. *Because of him?* Was that entirely fair? She had been a willing lover. Now he was saying he wished he had known about her tragedy. *Their tragedy.* He would have been here. Helped... shared... comforted. Should she believe him? "It all happened so fast," she said. "I was having some physical problems, which is why I stopped taking the pill. By the time I realized that I was actually pregnant, my condition had worsened. I thought my physical problems were emotionally oriented, caused by our separation. There was nothing to be done to prevent the miscarriage. The doctor assured me it was for the best. At the time I doubted it. But, realistically, I know he's right."

Reid looked at her silently, his eyes deep and sorrowful. Or was that what Loren wanted to see—sympathy, remorse, agony? They were all there. But they failed to give her the satisfaction she always thought they would. She had wanted to punish him as she had been punished. And yet Reid seemed quite shaken by the revelation.

Loren continued to explain, her tone dull. "I was so hurt that you would go directly from my arms to hers, that I couldn't think straight. The pregnancy was just another reason to hate you."

"Hate me?" Reid raised his dark eye-

brows. "I don't... *can't* believe that, Loren."

She smiled ruefully. "I wanted to. It would have been easier if I could have despised you. But you know, I couldn't do that." Her voice trailed to a whisper.

His finger lifted her chin. "I didn't spend last night with a woman who hated me. Or this morning. Maybe our love story is just beginning, baby." His crooked smile was half teasing, half serious.

She moved away from him. "There are too many complications in our lives now, Reid. You have your father to care for and a very different lifestyle out West. I have my career here in Washington. Then, there is—"

"Mark?"

She sighed. "Yes, Mark."

There was an uncomfortable pause, then Reid asked again, "Do you love him?"

Loren laughed dryly. "Mark and I have many of the same interests. And he's here in Washington."

"I don't think you have a thing in common," Reid growled. Then he stepped close, leaning toward her until she backed against the kitchen cabinet. He bent down and caressed her lips with his own. His hands rested on the cabinet above, but didn't touch her.

Despite her wishes, a tightness grew within her as his torment elicited the desired reactions from her.

When he finally released her, Loren moaned angrily. "Damn you, Reid Mecena! You're a devil to manipulate me like that!"

"Guilty," he murmured against her cheek. "I just wanted you to see how *we* react together, Loren. The chemistry is still there, so don't deny it."

"I don't deny it, just leave me alone to try to sort this out. You can't step back into my life this easily."

Reid moved away, reaching for his

jacket. "Maybe you're right, Loren. But I'll guarantee that you haven't seen the last of me. We're just beginning, baby. I promise," he murmured.

The next night at the official dinner Loren had wrangled him an invitation to, Reid paced the shiny Italian-tiled floor, then tore his brooding eyes away from the door and gazed over the crowd. They were a staid-looking bunch, each and every one thinking his or her job was absolutely crucial to the total system. Everyone in government believed that. Everyone in the whole city of Washington, D.C., was vitally important. Or so they thought.

His dark eyes cased the columned entranceway. Loren and Mark were half an hour late. Reid knew he would be jealous to see her with another man. And yet, he had no claims on her. But after a six-year abstinence from Loren, he found that he cared for her much more than he had ever dared to admit.

A small commotion snapped Reid's attention to the doorway. An attractive, well-dressed couple was visible through the columns, and his heart pounded with the recognition. There she was! Smiling, shaking hands, leaning on her escort's arm.

As Loren stepped down the few steps into the room, it was apparent that she belonged in this elite setting. Reid stared dumbly at her, as if he hadn't seen her in years, hadn't held her close only a day ago, hadn't loved her throughout a passion-filled night.

She smiled graciously and extended her hand. "Reid! How delightful! I want you to meet Mark Manning."

What an actress! Thank God she didn't introduce Mark as "my fiancée." Her voice trailed into his range. "... my old friend, Reid Mecenā. Reid's from Arizona and is here lobbying for the new

water bill before Congress." She stepped closer to Mark.

Reluctantly Reid's hand moved from hers to a mannerly handshake with the rather tall man beside her. God! He wanted the hand to be a fist—jammed right into Mark's solar plexus. How dare he touch *her*! Reid forced a smile. "Nice to meet you, Mark."

Mark Manning had a strong handshake and kept his left arm possessively around Loren's waist. Reid hated him.

"My pleasure, Reid. Are you related to the Senator Mecenā from Arizona who was in Washington a few years ago?"

Reid nodded. "My father."

Loren smiled. "The senator is in poor health now, Mark. He's back in Arizona."

"Sorry to hear that, Reid. What part of Arizona?"

"Southern Arizona. Near Tucson," Reid answered. Briefly his eyes grazed over Loren. She was absolutely gorgeous in a slinky black dress.

Mark responded with growing interest. "I know that area well. IBM, Gates Learjet, Hughes, and the copper mines. Lots of potential there."

Reid raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised you're so informed. Most people think that all Arizona has to offer is the Grand Canyon."

"I make it my business to know. I'm impressed with Arizona's utilization of resources. And I'll be glad to help you with this water bill all I can. I know a couple of people who will be invaluable to you."

Reid nodded. "I would appreciate any assistance I could get. I represent over three hundred businesses and ranchers in Arizona. Our economy is dependent on this bill."

"It's your economy I'm most interested in, Reid. In fact, I have a small investment in a mining company south of Tucson. It's been suffering drastically the

last few years, and I'd like to see some profits someday," Mark admitted.

Loren looked curiously at him. "I didn't realize you had stock in a mine there, Mark."

"Don't you remember last year when I went out there for a week, darling? You were probably in the middle of a case," Mark offered in a slightly condescending tone.

Reid cast Loren a curious glance. Actually he was heartened to know that Mark could be gone from Loren for an entire week, and she hadn't even missed him.

Reid listened politely, but inside he was smiling. And the singular dimple revealed itself daringly to Loren for the first time that evening. Taking a deep drink, he seemed to relax somewhat. "I can't guarantee that the passage of this water bill will increase the profits in your copper mine, Mark. But without it I can assure you that the mines—as well as all of us—will eventually fold."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "I'd like you to meet my partner, Reid. How about lunch sometime?"

"Sure," Reid agreed. Much to his chagrin, Reid was finding that Mark had the personal interest and connections with the right people to be of more help on the water bill than anyone in the room.

Mark spotted someone across the room. "Would you two excuse me for a moment?"

"Certainly," Loren murmured with obvious relief.

"Where have you been?" Reid complained as soon as Mark was out of sight.

"Oh, the car stalled on the way, and we had to leave it and call a cab," Loren said.

"A likely story," Reid replied in a muffled voice.

"Reid, don't be so paranoid. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I just love to see the lady

I adore on the arm of another man."

"Please, Reid—" she began, but Mark walked up to them again.

Smoothly, Reid turned to him. "Loren mentioned that you had car trouble. It's not a good idea to leave your car unattended at night in D.C. Why don't you call a tow truck and I'll drop you off so you can accompany it to the station. And you won't have to worry about Loren. I'll be happy to see her home."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to—" Mark began to object.

Reid held up his hand. "Think nothing of it."

Loren's large eyes moved from Mark to Reid. Well, he'd seen to it that she wouldn't be with Mark tonight, thank heavens. And now she and Reid would be together. Another love-filled night!

During the following week they spent several more nights together before Loren told Reid that she needed a break from him and some time to think. She knew it was only a matter of time before she broke off her engagement from Mark entirely, but thankfully he had gone out of town, so she could avoid it a while longer.

On her third day of avoiding Reid, she was in her office, trying unsuccessfully to concentrate on a case when he surprised her with a telephone call.

"Loren, God I've missed you. I've got to see you right away. It's important."

Loren laughed, loving the sound of him, realizing she'd missed him desperately too. She looked at her calendar and said impetuously, "Well, I'm booked up all day except for lunch. Do you want me to meet you somewhere?"

"Yes. How about our restaurant on the bay?"

"That's fine. What's so important?"

"I'll tell you later. See you at two!"

"Yes, two," she repeated softly.

Loren hung up the phone and sighed

heavily. Her violet eyes stared pensively down at the brown cobblestone street, remembering the times they had walked to the wharf and along the Potomac. Those had been carefree days when neither had worried about the future.

Now she was older and wiser and very aware of the pain this unfulfilled love could bring. If she gave in to her love, would Reid simply leave again? Deep inside, even now, she knew the answer. He was in Washington for a limited time, lobbying for a bill that would be voted on in a month or so. Then he would be gone.

The alternate solution to his leaving was far from reasonable to Loren. Thoughts of uprooting her entire life, everything she had worked for, were certainly less than appealing. As a child she had watched her mother give up everything for her father. It was something she had vowed to herself never to do. She wouldn't break that vow six years ago and couldn't break it now.

Loren walked the floor and raked loose strands of unruly hair back from her face. Agonizing images wracked her brain as she tried to attain a solution she could live with. And yet a singular idea kept approaching her from all sides. The only way to have Reid, on both their terms, was to be his mistress!

Could she live like that? Be happy? Would she be satisfied to have him whenever he came to Washington? Was her love that strong? To reserve it just for him? At his whims? At hers? Maybe... maybe it wouldn't be so bad. She would have plenty of time to pursue her career, and still she would have his love, if only occasionally. Perhaps it would work.

Two hours later, Reid's car sped along the highway as he crossed the river and drove north. The fresh, moist fragrance of the lush foliage filled his nostrils, stirring dormant emotions. The humid, briny

air off the bay jolted his memory, filling him with excitement. He was meeting her in one of their old favorite haunts. It felt like eons since their last time together.

This little place had been a wonderful spot to escape to, years ago, when it was only the two of them in the world that mattered.

Reid pulled to a stop and smiled faintly at the weathered plank nailed over the doorway, claiming simply RESTAURANT. Loren's car was already here. With long strides he avoided the front door, heading around to the back, to the small balcony that overlooked the inlet.

And there she was! Reid's heart pounded at the sight of her, sitting alone at the crude wooden table, looking out over the rippling water. He was filled with love and longing for her that six years and worlds of differences had not been able to obliterate.

"Why don't we skip lunch and go someplace secluded," he murmured against her ear.

She turned to him with a happy smile, and their eyes locked for a moment in time.

Her hand reached up to caress his face and she kissed him gently and lovingly. "I wondered if you would even remember how to get here."

Reid sat next to her on the wooden bench and took her hand. "Remember? Ah, *mi amor*, after all the time we spent here and around this bay? My heart remembers, Loren. I was serious about getting away, alone. I'm aroused just looking at you. It's been so long—"

"I know, Reid, but we'd better go ahead and order." She squeezed his hand affectionately. I have an appointment with a client in an hour."

Reid sighed and gave her a wouldn't-you-know glance.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I have a lot of work to do this afternoon. Several ap-

pointments.”

“I can tell you’re a career woman,” he admonished, his dark eyes teasing.

“I took the time to come all the way up here for lunch with you, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “And I’m glad you did. I must admit, I’ve been wondering why.”

Loren sighed and looked out over the water. The salty breeze lifted her tawny hair away from her face. “I . . . sometimes come up here alone. Just to reminisce. But always alone, because this was our place. And I wanted to remember it again, with you this time.”

“It is unchanged.” He nuzzled her earlobe. “I’d like to think our love is unchanged, too, Loren.”

“Oh, Reid, nothing stays unchanged.” She quivered inside at his touch, his kiss, his admission of love. She knew it, and felt it too. But—

“Maybe you’re right, Loren. Actually I had another reason for calling you today.” His voice was low and serious. “I got a call this morning from home. It’s my father. He’s very ill. He’s been hospitalized in serious condition. Lupe says he has a lung infection. Trouble is, he’s just not strong enough to fight these infections anymore. Everyone at home is very upset, and I need to go back. And I want you to go with me. I’m going to wind up some business this afternoon and leave very early in the morning. Please come. It’ll be a mini-vacation for you. I’ve always wanted to show you my world.”

“Your world?” She laughed. “You make it sound like another continent.”

He looked up at the thick-leaved branches draped over the lazy river. “It almost could be.”

“Reid, I just don’t see how I can go. I have appointments all week, and—you will be back, won’t you?” Her large eyes rose alarmingly to him. She wasn’t ready to lose him yet.

He shrugged. “Depends on Dad’s condition. But my work here isn’t finished. I’d like to stay longer, make more contacts. I plan to return in a few days.”

She dropped her eyes and dark lashes feathered her cheeks. “I’m afraid you won’t return.”

“Then don’t make me go alone. I—I just want you with me, Loren. You can reschedule your appointments.” His finger lifted her chin while his thumb edged her lower lip longingly.

Her eyes met his, and she knew there would come a time when his work in Washington would be finished. And then—*what?* “Oh, Reid, don’t make me choose now.”

“All I want you to do right now is go to Arizona with me.”

She reached over to caress his face, and made a sudden, rash decision. “Why don’t you come over tonight? We can leave together in the morning.”

Reid grasped her forearm and pulled her against his chest. “Loren, I love you.” His whisper rocked through her as if he had shouted it to the world.

As darkness fell, a full moon bathed the capital city, the Potomac, and the little townhouse on Prince Street in its luminous splendor. Inside, that glow was enhanced as Loren basked in Reid’s arms.

“Will you tell Mark that you are going to Arizona with me?” he asked, his hand nestled on her rib cage.

“He’s out of town at the moment,” Loren answered. “What’s wrong? Feeling guilty?”

“Not exactly guilty. It’s more like a burning rage inside me whenever I think of you two together or see that ring on your finger.”

Immediately sitting up, she extended her left hand. “Does that make you feel any better?” With a deft, sure motion, Loren removed the engagement ring and

tossed it onto the dresser.

"Loren—" He grasped the ringless hand and pressed it to his lips, his mahogany eyes imploring, questioning.

"Reid, you're right about Mark and me. We don't belong together."

"Do you think if I hadn't reappeared in your life you and Mark would still have gone your separate ways?"

She hesitated and her blue eyes met his honestly. "I think so, Reid. If I continued with this mockery of a relationship with him, it would be a mistake."

Before the last word was out, a low moan of undisguised longing escaped Reid's throat, and he clutched her to him as if he would press her onto every cell, as if he would never let her go.

Sudden tears filled her blue eyes. "Reid, what's going to happen to us? Will we—"

His shadowed face hovered near hers in the darkness. "We'll work things out, Loren. I promise."

The early fingers of dawn found Loren curled in the secure nest of Reid's arms. She wondered, in her dreamlike state, what his "world" would be like. She knew Reid so well, yet she didn't. There were still unanswered questions. Was there a place for them to be together? Was this wonderful time in his arms limited? If she declared herself his mistress and reserved her love just for him, would he return often to see her? To love her? Could she even bear living like that?

Reid sighed in his sleep and nestled his head against her neck. Loren shivered at the chilling thought of losing him again.

There was nothing in Loren's past, nor in all the travel books, nor in all the *National Geographics*, nor in Reid's descriptions, to sufficiently prepare her for the sight of the Arizona landscape.

At Casa del Oro, Loren was introduced to Raul and Lupe, the middle-aged

brother and sister who had worked for Reid's family for years.

Walking down the Mexican-tiled veranda, Loren exclaimed, "There is so much land here, I can't believe it!" Prolific magenta bougainvillea draped gracefully over every post the entire length of the long, covered porch. A stretch of brick walkways and stairs led down to a large swimming pool, and beyond it the land sloped ever downward until it stretched into a desert valley several miles in width. The sun, a brilliant orange ball, hovered hotly over the cool purple mountain outlines.

Reid's hand settled comfortably on her shoulder as he murmured, "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Why, Reid, it's breathtaking! And all this space—"

"Loren, do you mind if I go ahead to the hospital? Everyone around here is in such a turmoil, I need to see for myself exactly what Dad's condition is."

"Of course not. Do you want me to go with you?"

He shook his head curtly. "No. Dad is in intensive care and you probably couldn't see him anyway. You stay here and relax; try out the pool."

She nodded. "I'll be fine here."

"We should have a beautiful sunset tonight. Don't miss it!" He led Loren back toward the house. "Lupe, take care of Loren, *por favor*. And show her to my room, please. I'll take the guest room. I'm going to the hospital to see about Dad now. I may not be home soon, so don't hold dinner."

Lupe nodded and began to gather Loren's things.

Reid kissed Loren quickly, then disappeared around the hacienda, leaving her to follow Lupe inside. Glass walls allowed the outside beauty to enter the living quarters, giving the feeling of being completely enmeshed with the desert.

The two women walked across expansive rooms, floored with large, square Mexican tiles. Mexican and Indian oil paintings hung on white brick walls.

"This room is Reid's. I think he wants you to enjoy the view and the Jacuzzi," Lupe offered, showing Loren the magnificent bathroom. "And this," Lupe explained as she opened floor-to-ceiling shutters, "is the view."

"Oh, my," Loren muttered inanely as words failed her. "It is lovely!" Looming beyond the house and small patio were the granite cliffs of yet another mountain range.

"*Si, senorita*," Lupe said. "It is beautiful."

"Please, Lupe, call me Loren. I've heard so much about you, I hope we can be friends."

Lupe smiled. "*Gracias*. I have heard of you, too, *Senorita Loren*. Reid told me about you. I'm glad you came with him this time."

Loren raised her chin at the slight comment, wondering just how much Reid had told Lupe about them. "I'm glad I came, too, Lupe."

Lupe turned the covers down. "If you are tired, please feel free to take a nap. Dinner will be ready in about an hour. And *senorita*, don't forget about the sunset. *Senor Reid* wouldn't want you to miss it."

Loren spent the next few hours exploring the hacienda, the pool, the veranda and its spectacular view, the glorious sunset. She talked for a while with Lupe and dined alone, sipping mild bean soup and nibbling crunchy tortilla pieces.

Her intentions of staying up to wait for Reid faltered, and she decided that she could as easily see him in the morning.

Almost the moment her head touched the cool pillow, she was asleep. Sometime in the night, she stirred to the warmth of a masculine body curling close, and Reid's

familiar fragrance permeated her very being. She enfolded him in her arms and murmured, "I like your world, Reid."

"The sunset?"

"Spectacular!"

He buried his face against her neck. "So are you."

"Reid, how's your father?"

His voice was a low groan. "Stable. We're waiting and watching."

"Oh, Reid, Reid..." She comforted him in a mellow voice, holding and stroking the form pressed against her throughout the night.

The sun was squeezing through the shutters when Loren awoke. She gazed sleepily around the empty room and wondered if she had been dreaming again that she'd held Reid in her arms all night. It wouldn't be the first time such a vivid dream had been hers.

The morning was surprisingly cool, although it warmed up quickly, and Loren and Reid had a lazy swim and took their lunch at the pool. Reid suggested that they ride into the Catalina Mountains on the following day.

In the afternoon, Reid spent several hours in his office, then headed downtown for meetings and another trip to the hospital.

Loren lounged in the sun as long as she dared, then ambled inside. She sat in the kitchen and had tea while Lupe was chopping vegetables.

After a brief nap, Loren spent a heavenly hour in the Jacuzzi, her mind roaming to the limits of her imagination. She leaned back and closed her eyes, dreaming about Reid's body pressed urgently against her.

By evening, when he returned, they were both hungry for each other. One starved exchange of glances between them and it was obvious. He was weary, and the sight of Loren's blue-violet eyes and relaxed smile made him ever grateful he had

persuaded her to come along.

But Loren thought there was a definite slump in the squareness of Reid's shoulders tonight. Perhaps it was the heavy load he was carrying, plus the unfinished business of the water bill in Washington.

He poured some wine and handed her a glass. "Come on. This is the prettiest part of the day. Out here on the veranda, *mi amor*."

They sipped dry wine on the veranda while the setting sun sent its magnificent explosion of color across the western sky.

Lupe approached, saying "Everything's done, Señor Reid. Your dinner is in the warming oven."

"Fine, Lupe. We'll see you in the morning."

"*Buenas noches*, Señor Reid, Señorita Loren."

Loren smiled at her new friend. "Good evening, Lupe. Thanks for making me feel so much at home here."

"*Si, señorita*."

"Where does she live, Reid?" Loren asked as Lupe's car drove away.

"She has a small place in the barrio. Remarkable woman. She has two children of her own and is keeping the teen-aged son of her sister, who died last year. A few years ago that bastard she married deserted them, leaving her with two small children to support. We tried to persuade her to move out here, but she keeps hoping her husband will return to the family someday."

"Well I can tell that she's extremely grateful to you and your father. Why, she thinks the sun rises and sets with your dad . . . and with you!" Loren boasted.

"What about you, Loren?"

She laughed and scoffed. "I know better, *Señor Reid*!"

"Do you know that I need you?" His voice was low and serious. "Can you see that I want you . . . now?" Reid's eyes were sable signals of suppressed passion.

Loren's eyes inadvertently traveled down Reid's frame as he sat lounging in the chair beside her. God! He was appealing.

"Before dinner?" She grinned mischievously as her eyes rose to meet his.

"Why not?"

She shrugged, submission quivering on the ends of her every nerve.

He stood and pulled her up against him. "I can give you fifty good reasons not to wait. Mainly, though, I want you . . . want to love you, Loren."

Forgotten were their wineglasses, their waiting dinner, even the illness that brought them to Arizona. Loren was aware only of being carried to heaven and the fiery trail of Reid's lips on her skin. By the time they reached his bedroom, she was burning with an inner fever that could be quenched only by Reid's matching passion.

"Loren, *mi amor*." Reid's voice was muffled against her temple. "I can never get enough of you," he sighed, rolling her into the cradle of his arm.

She smiled contentedly and kissed his throbbing neck. "Never?" A teasing finger traced his hipline. "What about now . . . again?"

"Later, my sexy *señorita*!" He laughed from deep within his chest. "First, the Jacuzzi . . . together. Next, dinner. Your man's hungry! Then . . ." He smiled wickedly. "Then, *mi preciosa*, whatever you want!"

"Promise?" She tweaked a dark hair.

"Promise!"

The next morning Reid woke her early, and within the hour they were loaded with lunch, plenty of water, and high spirits for their adventure in the mountains.

"We'll see you sometime this afternoon, Lupe," Reid advised. Then, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder, he added, "I talked with the doctor this

morning. Dad had a restful night and seems to be improving. So don't worry about him."

"*Si*, Señor Reid." Lupe nodded obediently. "Be careful. Don't forget, *Senorita Loren* is a gringo!"

"I know," he chuckled. "We'll be back before the monsoons have a chance to blow in."

"Please be careful of the *chubasco*!" Lupe motioned overhead at the usually solid blue sky. "We already have clouds!"

"Don't worry, Lupe." He helped Loren mount her horse.

A misty haze settled over the Catalinas as they rode up the rocky path into the cactus-covered heights. They rose rapidly above the hacienda and stopped long enough to view the stretch of Oro Valley and the far Tucson Mountains with their pinkish glow.

"This is just beautiful, Reid. Now, what monsoon were you and Lupe discussing?" Loren encouraged her horse beside Reid's.

"Oh, for several months in the summer we have what everyone calls the monsoon season. Lupe calls it *Chubasco*, which means sudden thunderstorm. That more aptly describes it. It's our rainy season."

"Out here? Looks like you haven't had rain in months."

"Well, it doesn't rain in the same spot every day. Sometimes the clouds sail right over us. But when it does rain, it comes hard and fast, creating flash floods and bringing intense electricity."

"Oh." Loren nodded. To her, rain was rain. It fell frequently in Washington.

By noon they had traveled to another ecological zone. Plant growth consisted not only of numerous types of cacti, but of various medium-size trees that provided shade. Reid even found a small trickle of a stream, allowing a brief cool respite from the increasing heat of the Arizona sun. Loren ate as if it were her

last meal, stretched her legs, and walked around the small, shaded harbor. "Did you say earlier there's gold up here?" she asked when they'd finished.

"Oh, sure. Somewhere. Many a man spent his life—and lost it—searching for gold up here."

Loren's eyes narrowed as she tried to imagine such a life. "Oh, Reid, how exciting! Wouldn't it be an experience to search for it?" Her face was alight with the prospect.

He kissed her nose. "My sense of adventure wants to guide us to a special field of wild flowers, where we might spot some bighorn sheep, then back down off this treacherous mountain before these clouds build up any higher."

"Spoilsport!" Loren fussed as she mounted her horse and followed Reid up the ever-narrowing trail.

They found the field, but Reid was intent on the growing dark clouds that blocked the burning sun. Shadows spotted the terrain, and instead of stopping by the stream on their return, they shared a drink from Reid's canteen and kept moving. Suddenly the air was cool, and a moist breeze buffeted them from the south. The sky darkened and the temperature dropped noticeably. Reid urged Loren to hurry, but the rains came before they made it home. After trying to continue for a short distance in the cold rain, he finally decided they should take refuge.

The desert storm became violent quickly, with loud cracking of thunder and brilliant streaks of lightning stretching from black, menacing sky to brown, drenched earth. It was spectacular, but there was no time to enjoy the beauty. Loren wrestled to control her horse, but lost her seat when he bolted wildly.

Reid lunged at the bridle, but the animal reared frantically and broke away down the obscure mountain trail. Reid turned his attention to Loren, who was

huddling in a muddy heap. Dismounting, he quickly tied his horse to a sturdy scrub oak and gathered her in his arms.

"Baby, are you all right?"

"Depends on what you call all right!" she snapped. "I'm cold, wet, muddy, and humiliated! Otherwise I'm fine!"

"No broken bones? Then come on!"

Roughly he pulled her to her feet, and they scrambled across a stretch of sodden sandstone until they reached a ledge of limestone, which provided limited protection from the rain, although tiny rivulets crept inward to where Reid and Loren huddled.

Loren clung to Reid, seeking a warmth he couldn't provide. "I'm so miserable!" she said. "Let's get out of here."

He cradled her to his wet shirt. "I know, baby. But we can't leave yet. We're safe under here." His dark eyes watched the transformation of the dry washes to treacherous riverbeds of rushing water. Above them he could hear the crashing of a wall of water in the area they had just traversed. Within minutes that wall rushed past them, clearing out everything in its path. He could only hope that Loren's horse was well out of the way by now. And that his remained tied.

Even after the rain had halted they had to remain in place, waiting for the heavy runoff to subside. So they lingered, cold and miserable.

Several bone-chilling hours later Reid stirred. "I think we can start to make our way back now. We may have to walk part of the way."

Loren was so cold that she was shaking all over. She moved woodenly, but followed him, knowing there was no other way out. They led Reid's horse as they hiked down the steepest part. Stumbling over the sodden earth, Loren was grateful for her heavy cowboy boots. It didn't matter that mud was caked two inches thick all over them. Thankfully the cacti she

brushed against didn't penetrate the heavy leather.

Finally they reached an area where the horse could retain his footing. Reid heaved himself into the saddle and pulled Loren snugly behind him. She clung limply to his wet back, and they rode on quietly, two wet, cold people silhouetted against pink and orange sunset. At dusk they were received by welcoming hands and the worried prattle of Lupe.

"I told you! *El chubasco!* When that horse came back, I knew. I just knew! *Ayy, Dios mio! Gracias a Dios!* Come with me, *pobrecita,*" Lupe crooned and led her inside.

While Loren stripped off her clothes, Lupe ran hot water in the tub. Gratefully Loren sank into the warm liquid, hoping its warmth would seep into her chilled bones.

By the time she could hear Reid running the shower next door, she was snugly tucked into bed, sipping hot tea laced with something.

What a day this had been! The land had actually turned on them! It became their enemy, trying in every way to drive them away, or destroy them. It was no wonder miners lost their lives hunting the elusive gold!

Loren drifted off to sleep with visions of herself and Reid riding mules into the mountains on an ill-fated search for gold. She woke achy and miserable, feeling out of place. She avoided Reid's eye when he brought in a breakfast tray for her.

He opened the shutters, set down the tray, then poured champagne into two glasses. He walked over to Loren, stood close, and placed one delicate crystal in her hand. "*Salud, mi amor.*"

She raised her eyes to his and chafed, "To my health? We should be toasting the fact that we're not at the bottom of some dry gulch somewhere in Canada del Oro!"

Reid's dark eyes flickered with ire, but he managed to retain a cool exterior. Tilting the glass toward her, he acquiesced. "To our lives, then." He made the effort to click his glass to hers, then gulped half the contents. "Have some breakfast, Loren." The warm spark was gone from his tone, Loren had doused those embers.

"It looks like rain," she said.

"The cloud-cover will help hold the temperature down. Rain never bothered you before."

"My life has never been threatened by it before."

If she was waiting for apologies from this arrogant man, Loren could tell that she would have to wait all day . . . and then some!

"That's the way it is out here, Loren. Sometimes survival is a challenge." Reid shoved a bowl of fruit into her hands, then took his breakfast and settled in the rugged rawhide chair near the window. His ebony eyes raked over her, leaving a chill like the rain of the previous day.

Loren sat on the bed and turned to her bowl of fruit like a sulking child. Finally she offered hesitantly, "Thank you for the champagne breakfast. I'm sorry if I've spoiled it."

"I guess it was spoiled before it began."

Loren sipped her champagne thoughtfully. *What a rotten way to start the day!* "Reid, I can't help it if I think this desert is strange. It's alien to everything I know."

He smiled grimly. "I'll admit it's vastly different from Washington, D.C."

Reid rose and lumbered over to fill the western-size coffee mugs, lacing each with thick, rich cream.

"How's your father?" Loren blurted out. With a pang of conscience she realized that she hadn't even thought of the hospitalized man in over twenty-four hours. Her only concern had been their

experience on the mountain. She hadn't even thought of him when she was warm and safe in bed . . . in *his* home!

"He called me this morning with instructions to bring the ledger in to the hospital."

"The ledger? You mean he wants to work? Are you going to let him do that?"

Reid's face was tight, but there was a degree of restrained relief evident in his eyes. "Oh, he's not in any shape to work, although he thinks he is. But it's a good sign."

"Oh, I'm so glad he is better, Reid. I feel so guilty. I didn't even think about him last night. Did you—"

"Go to the hospital? Yes, *mi amor*. After you were warm and asleep in my bed."

"Oh, Reid." Loren's eyes were large and sorrowful when Reid crossed the room to her. Cupping her face in his hands, he stared deeply into her eyes for a long minute.

In a totally reflexive action her hands reached up to cover his, and the energy that flowed between them as they touched was detectable in a powerful, almost tangible way. A wellspring of jubilation swelled inside Loren as Reid looked at her.

Eventually even the towering self-control Reid exhibited crumbled, his lips caught hers, and their spirits combined in that one kiss so infinitely that they both knew its full implications.

"Oh, God, Loren—" he rasped.

"What . . . what do you want from me?"

"Your love is all I ask." His voice was low and hoarse. "I don't give a damn what you think of Arizona. The only thing I care about is what you feel for me. And I think that was answered just now. You can't hide your feelings from me, *mi amor*. Don't deny your love again."

He broke the electric trance and strode across the room, leaving Loren to stare

after him, dazed and confused.

Then he turned to her and said in a surprisingly tame tone, "I'll be back from the hospital in an hour."

After he left Loren sipped her champagne and wrestled with her emotions alone. A short hour ago, when she had awakened, she thought she hated everything about this strange desert land, including Reid Mecena. Mostly she hated him for what happened yesterday. They had been in physical danger and it was his fault! She had gone along in innocence.

Or was she blaming him because she wanted to relieve herself? Because she sought an excuse to find fault with the man she loved . . . and therefore reason to end their relationship?

Oh, dear God! She buried her face in her hands. It had been like this when she had been pregnant, then miscarried. In her numbed mind Reid was responsible for all that grief. She had overlooked her own role in the pregnancy, simply because she wanted to have a reason to blame him. To hate him. But could she? Could she hate him now? He claimed not. Could he tell from one kiss? One breathtaking, all-encompassing kiss?

Later when Reid returned from the hospital, they spent the rest of the day sightseeing in what Reid referred to as Geronimo country. By the time they drove back to the hacienda in Canada del Oro, dusk was approaching.

Raul hurried out to meet the truck before Reid had time to switch off the engine. The expression on his face told them that something was wrong. Loren froze inside, fearing the worst.

Reid opened the door and shouted, "Is it Dad, Raul? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Senor Reid," Raul puffed as he ran toward them, his dark face flushed. "It's not Senor Mecana. It's Lupe! She's hurt!"

Visions of everything from snakebite to a broken leg filled Loren's mind as she dashed behind the two men. When they entered the kitchen Lupe was sitting at the table, dabbing her eyes with a white handkerchief. She appeared perfectly normal until she turned to face them.

"Lupe! What happened?" Reid demanded, scrutinizing her face.

Against the wall stood a gangly youth of about fourteen, of Mexican descent.

"Lupe, darling! You've been hit!" Loren gasped.

Lupe's left eye was swollen almost shut, and a huge, ugly bruise under her eye had already turned various stages of red and purple. There was a slight cut in the corner of her lip, but the blood flow had been curtailed.

In disbelief Reid regarded Loren with a bewildered expression. "Is it true, Lupe?" His lips drew back in fury, for he knew, even before she nodded. "Who did it?"

Lupe's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Geraldo."

"Geraldo?" Reid cast a questioning look at Raul.

"Her husband," Raul said quietly.

Reid's temper exploded loudly. "When? Why did you let that bastard in? How could something like this happen right under our noses?" Reid shot questions at everyone in the room that only Lupe could answer.

"Take it easy, Reid," Loren admonished quietly, placing a cooling hand on his arm. "Let's find out what happened."

"That's what I'm trying to do! Them I'm gonna go out and kill the bastard! How in hell could a man lay a hand on a woman? On Lupe?" His dark eyes burned.

Loren's tone was quiet, but firm. "Reid, I agree. But just calm down a few minutes." She then turned to Lupe, who was once again sniffing into the handker-

chief. "Lupe, have you put anything on that eye?"

Lupe shook her head miserably.

"Well, then," Loren advised as she walked to the refrigerator, "we'd better get some ice on it before it swells any more." She grabbed a plastic storage bag, filled it with ice cubes, and wrapped the whole thing in a towel. The makeshift ice bag was temporary, but it had already served its initial purpose, that of diversion. Even the men stood around watching her work and talk, as if it were the most important activity going on at the moment.

"Here you go, Lupe. This will check the swelling and make it feel better," Loren said, sitting beside her. "Now, tell us what happened."

Lupe turned somber eyes to Loren, and ignoring the gaping men around them, she began to pour out her story. "Roberto, my nephew, was home from school today with a sore throat." She gestured to the youth. "He called me around noon to say that Geraldo was at home, demanding to see me. When Roberto told him I was at work, it only seemed to make Geraldo madder. So I said I would go and talk to him. I thought I could make him leave!"

Raul interjected, "I wanted to go with her. But she said no. I didn't know things were this bad, or I would have gone anyway!"

"So you went back home alone?" Loren began.

Lupe nodded. "There he was, beating on the windows and yelling! I think he had been drinking. I thought we could talk. But he insisted that he was coming back here to live, and he wanted to see the girls. I told him no! He was in no condition to see the girls. And that's when he..." Fresh tears started to flow.

"Where is the son of a bitch? I can't wait to get my hands on him!" Reid started in the direction of the door.

"I'm going with you!" Raul barked.

Lupe rushed forward, grasping Reid's arms. "Oh, no, Senor Reid! Please, don't do that! Don't hurt him!"

"What?" Reid asked incredulously. "Just look what he did to you!"

She shook her head fiercely. "I don't care! I don't want you to go!" she sobbed.

"Reid!" Loren's voice was steely. "That won't solve anything."

Reid struggled for control. "All right, we'll call the police and let them take over. We'll have him arrested!"

"No, Senor Reid!" Lupe cried. "Please don't call the police! I... couldn't do that! He's still my husband. And the father of my children." Her voice trailed to a sad whisper.

"But, Lupe, I don't understand..." Reid sighed.

"Reid," Loren rendered calmly, "it will do no good to call the police if she won't press charges."

Reid turned on Loren, his eyes deeply passionate. "What do *you* suggest we do? Sit around here on our hands until this fool decides to come back and tear the place apart, and Lupe and her children along the way? Speaking of the children, where are the girls, Lupe?"

"They're safe with my neighbor. She usually keeps them after school and is letting them spend the night with her. Geraldo doesn't know her, so he wouldn't suspect where they are." Her sobbing had subsided somewhat.

"Well, I don't want you going back home tonight! It just isn't safe!" Reid decided.

Loren agreed. "I think that's a wise decision, Lupe."

Reid paced the floor, clenching his hands. Helpless! He hated the feeling!

Loren recognized the signs of frustration and defeat among those present. She felt them too. But she had seen too many

women in similar situations to force an immediate resolution. This situation needed careful thought and discussion. It would take time. Lupe would need their patient support, for the decisions would have to be hers.

"I don't like being a sitting duck," Reid said. "I want to do something now! Did you come up with any brilliant solutions, lady lawyer?"

Loren smiled tolerantly. "Well, you can do something, Reid. And you too, Raul." She pushed Lupe gently by the shoulders back to her seat at the table and pressed the ice pack into her hands. "Take care of that eye, Lupe, darling. Raul, would you please fix up a bed for Roberto in your cabin? I'm sure he is tired."

"Si." He motioned to the young man.

Loren gave Reid an appreciative smile. "Reid, you will be in charge of dinner. Why don't you go out and buy a bucket of fried chicken?"

The men began to shuffle around, obeying Loren's tactful demands. Reid grumbled under his breath, but followed her orders.

By the time the men returned to gather around the table to eat, Lupe was in a much better state. She even nibbled a little on a chicken leg and talked about calling her girls after dinner.

Reid's eyes met Loren's and suddenly he understood. Patience was what her silent pleas requested. "Uh, Lupe, while I was out to pick up the chicken, I stopped by the hospital to check on Dad."

"Oh, yes? How is he?" Lupe's expression changed to concern and interest.

"There's talk of letting him come home, perhaps by next week!"

The announcement was met with definite joy that overpowered the gloom of Lupe's situation.

"Well, if your dad is coming home soon," said Loren, "he will need quality care. Someone close. Someone like Lupe,

who knows his quirks as well as the routine of the ranch. And wouldn't it be much easier if she lived here at the ranch?" Loren posed the question with her head nodding affirmatively.

Reid picked up the suggestion enthusiastically. "Lupe, there's plenty of room for you and the children. In fact, we all would love to have the sounds of kids around the ranch. But I don't want you to feel overburdened." His warm smile canceled any doubts Lupe was harboring.

"Actually you would all be much safer if you lived here, Lupe," Loren urged. "Reid, isn't there an empty guest house?"

"Yes! It may take some remodeling, but we can arrange that. It would be perfect for you, Lupe."

"Great! We'll work on that tomorrow," Loren stated decisively. "Meanwhile, Raul can help move Lupe to the hacienda. We need to get settled before your father gets home, Reid. And there's so much to do!"

Reid watched with amusement as she bustled around the kitchen. "Well, I asked for brilliant solutions from our lady lawyer. Looks like we have them!"

"I'm glad you agree. Now, I'm going to see that Lupe gets a good hot bath. Lupe, you took care of me last night, tonight it's my turn. It's only fair."

The last few days in Arizona were a whirlwind of activity. Loren assumed direction of the varied activities while Reid assisted and watched her in amazement. What else could he do? She was damned right and damned efficient. She was remarkable!

By the time they left, Lupe was in tears, and Raul puffed up like a frog. His smile was tight. Even the aging Senator Mecena, who had only been home a few days, was sad to see the whirlwind of energy, this Loren of Reid's past, take off over the saguaro shadows. Everyone

feared the same thing. . . that they would never see her again. So did Reid.

A week later, Reid and Loren were sitting in the Jockey Club. Loren's face was alight with pleasure. She was in her element, and Reid knew it. She looked so much a natural part of the sophistication of the place—oriental rugs, overstuffed chairs, jazz tinkling from a distant piano. Beautiful Loren, with her bluebonnet eyes, her slender figure embellished by the folds of a silky, cream-colored gown with a daring slit that revealed a portion of gorgeous leg. God! How he loved her! How he wanted her!

"You're right about the atmosphere in Washington, Loren," Reid admitted as he reached for his gin and tonic. "There is a feeling here, an electricity in the air, that's hard to explain."

She sipped her drink. "That's true, but I feel very lucky to have had a chance to visit Arizona. It has its own special beauty."

His hand covered hers affectionately. "Loren, the people in my household owe you a debt of gratitude, and so do I. You left things running so smoothly at the hacienda. Dad is extremely happy to have Lupe so close. And now that she's had time to think, she has decided to file for divorce. She and her family are safe. The kids are having a ball! Roberto is working with Raul on the ranch after school and making a little money. Lupe's girls get to swim daily in the pool, and are very happy with their new living quarters."

"Wonderful. You did say you wanted children running all over the ranch, didn't you, Reid?" Loren reminded him with a grin.

His eyes reflected something deeper. "I meant my own children."

Loren chose not to pursue his statement. She smiled wistfully. "Tonight is so beautiful, Reid. I could sit here all night

and listen to that man in the corner make love to that piano! Have you ever heard such fantastic jazz renditions?" Loren's eyes were dreamy.

"I would rather make love to you."

"Dinner first," she teased.

"Promise? Or do I have to worry about running into Mark? I have horrible visions of hiding in your closet, boots in hand, in very embarrassing attire."

Loren laughed. "Don't worry. My relationship with Mark is definitely over. He was none too happy with my trip to Arizona."

Reid quipped, "I can't imagine why."

"I returned the engagement ring."

Reid's hand covered hers again in a reflexive gesture. His dark eyes explored her face. Now, again, it was just the two of them. "How do you feel about it?"

"Relieved." She smiled faintly.

"Me too." His fingertips caressed the place where the ring had been. It was as if that was one place on her body that he had never touched, and he had to make sure it was free. "What was Mark's reaction?"

"Actually I think he expected it. Ours wasn't an intimate association. But he raised hell because I failed to take care of business."

"What business?"

"He gave me a couple of names of people connected with his copper mine. I was to look them up for him while he was out of town. Honestly, Reid, I forgot all about it."

Reid shook his head. "I must say, Loren, Mark's connections have been invaluable. He has pushed this water bill. In fact, he's partly responsible for my opportunity to testify before the Interior Committee tomorrow.

"It's tomorrow?"

"I'll be presenting my case in the morning and fielding questions along with the governor in the afternoon. After that

...” He shrugged, and they both knew what was after that. *He would be leaving Washington.*

Loren didn’t want to think of it.

The next day Loren came home from work early. She had been extremely nervous and edgy since returning from Arizona. Even Althea, her partner, commented that she hadn’t returned from the trip rested at all. But Loren knew what was gnawing at her insides, waking her up at dawn, plaguing her every time she looked at Reid. Just as she walked in the door, the phone rang.

“Hello?” Her tone was tired.

Loren was instantly alert as an anxious Lupe related events at Casa del Oro. The most feared, the worst, the dreaded inevitable—they had all known it would happen.

When she cradled the phone, Loren buried her face in her hands. There were no tears, but she was grieving just the same. They were losing the senator... and she was losing Reid.

Hours later, his knock was hard and sharp. Almost before he let himself in the door, Loren had wrapped herself around him, her arms encircling his waist, her heart pressed fervently to his.

“Hey! Is this all I get for congratulations? Have you seen the news yet? The bill is a shoe-in with all the backers we need. Come on, Loren. You need to change. We’re meeting the governor for dinner!”

“Oh, Reid.” She buried the words against him, not caring about anything at the moment but him.

“Loren?” His hands grasped her shoulders and tried to pry her from the tight clasp. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Reid, Reid, it’s your father. No one could reach you.”

He froze. His dark eyes, deep and unflinching, examined her as he waited for

what she had to say. *Oh, God, how could she let him go?*

“I—I got a call from Lupe. She was nearly hysterical. Your father suffered another stroke four hours ago and was taken by ambulance to the hospital. Raul and the nurse are there with him. They think he is dying. Oh, Reid, I’m so sorry.” She cupped his drawn face with her hands and kissed him. Then they embraced for long, agonizing moments.

With a heavy sigh he shifted, moving stiffly away from her. “I, uh, I’ll call the hospital and talk to the nurse first. Then I’ll decide what to do.” He shrugged out of his coat as he reached for the phone. Fifteen minutes later he turned to Loren. “He has suffered severe damage and probably won’t make it through the night. I have to go soon.”

“I know. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Yes.” He ran his hand over his face, as if to clear his thinking. He had looked forward to relaxing tonight with Loren. But it wasn’t to be. Not tonight...

They sat together at the small table.

“Loren, will you go back with me?”

Her voice was strained. “If you want me to.”

He rose and paced the floor impatiently. “I don’t want you to go along just to wait at the hospital until my father dies. I want you to go with me to Arizona—to marry me.”

How could he think of marriage at a time like this?

“Reid, please don’t press for that decision at this time.” She sounded remarkably calm. Inside she was screaming.

“This is not sudden. The question was asked six years ago. That should have given you enough time.”

“Reid, you can’t go back that far.”

“Why not?” There was a hardness about his tone, his face, his entire body. “I loved you then. And I love you now, more

deeply than ever. Loren, I want you to be my wife."

All that they had been through and all that they meant to each other was suddenly on trial. Their future was at stake. For months now, years actually, they had skirted the issue, avoided mentioning the ultimate. Now they were on the brink of another abyss in their lives. Would they plunge into the darkness again?

"Reid, I love you too. You know that." Her voice was strained. "But I just don't see how—"

"Wait!" He was pacing, gesturing his frustration. "Am I going crazy? We've got two people here who love each other and yet you're saying you don't see how we can work this out?"

"No, that wasn't what I was about to say," she answered quietly. "I don't see how you can ask me to give up my career, my personal goals, my home. It isn't fair to me."

"Fair?" he barked. "Love isn't fair? Marriage isn't the answer? Most women want it. What's wrong, Loren?"

Loren wanted to say yes, unconditionally. However, something restrained her, reminded her that she must be true to herself as well. That there was another way. Yet a niggling thought in the back of her mind questioned it still. She sighed and cleared her throat. "I—I've given this a lot of thought, Reid. There is another solution."

He stopped pacing and narrowed his eyes. "Well, I'm glad to know you've considered the fact that I love you. And the likelihood that I would ask you to marry me... again! So what is my brilliant lady lawyer's decision this time?"

Was it sarcasm or sheer male frustration?

"I—I will always love you, Reid, and be here for you." She couldn't meet his black gaze when she said it.

"Here? In D.C.? Then you're refusing

me again?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. "No. I'm not denying our love at all, Reid. I'm admitting it. I cherish it... and you. And I will always be yours. I will be your... mistress." She couldn't believe she was actually saying it. It went against everything she stood for.

His staccato words jerked her eyes up to him. "My mistress, Loren? Is this what you really want for us?"

"No," she whispered hoarsely. "But it's the only solution I could figure. I just can't pick up and leave. Neither can you!"

"Only solution? My God, woman! I'm offering you my love, marriage, my ranch, everything I own and value in the world! Why do you insist on throwing our love away again?"

"I'm not throwing it away. Don't you understand, Reid? I will be yours alone."

"Here. In Washington." His tone was flat and empty.

"Yes."

He strode away from her, pacing the small kitchen like a caged lion. Suddenly his fury exploded. "I don't want a mistress! I want you as my wife! In Arizona! With kids running all over the ranch! Our kids! Is that so impossible to ask?"

"How can you ask me to give up all I've worked for these past six years?" She stood and met his fury steadily. It was something she believed in, and she had to defend it. She had given up six agonizing years of his love for this. It had to be a strong conviction. And she had to convince him of its importance to her. She couldn't make him understand before. Now she had more at stake.

"I'm not asking you to give up a thing, Loren! I'm asking you to be my wife! There are no strings attached to that."

"I—I can't." Her voice was weak.

"Why? Why the hell not?" His dark eyes were sad and his voice was a hoarse

whisper. He was losing again, and he wasn't sure why.

"I know I've never talked to you much about my mother, but I was only thirteen when she died. It's a very impressionable age, and I remember her well. She was an unhappy woman here in Washington with my father and me."

"Loren, I'm sorry about that part of your life. But what does that have to do with us?"

"Oh, God, Reid, please try to understand what I'm about to say. From a woman's view. . . from *my* view!" Her blue eyes begged, and he nodded his willingness. How could he do otherwise?

Loren slumped at the small table and continued to talk. "When my mother married Dad, she gave up a promising career in the theater. She wasn't able to pursue her personal goals here in Washington. As a politician's wife, she was involved in a social whirl beyond her control. You know what it's like. There was always something going on. She felt totally unfulfilled and blamed it on my father, especially after she became ill. I watched her bitterness grow. We don't want that to happen to our relationship, Reid." Tears filled her eyes. "I vowed that I would not compromise my goals for a man. Six years ago I felt the same way, but my career wasn't as satisfying then as it is now. I love my job and can't give it up. I will not jeopardize our relationship with the bitterness that comes from self-sacrifice."

Reid's reaction was not at all what she expected. No angry outbursts. No pacing and raving. He sat down opposite her, encasing her icy hands in his warm ones, and smiled. A gentle smile that revealed the single dimple in one cheek that she loved so much. In a low tone he asked, "Is that why, Loren? Is that why you refused me six years ago?"

She nodded sadly but gratefully, her heart reaching out to the man she loved.

"Do you want to have your career and a family too? Or are you saying that you don't desire the same things I do?"

One nervous hand reached to caress his face. "Oh, Reid, I love you so. I do want you. And a family. I still grieve that I lost our baby six years ago. But—"

"Well, surely you can figure out how to juggle all of that. I have never—*never*—asked you to give up anything in order to marry me! I wouldn't make demands like that on you, Loren, especially since it's so vital to you. All I'm asking is that you be my wife."

"But, Arizona is where you live—"

"For now it is, but you can keep your clients here in D.C. and set up an office there too. *Dios mio!* Look what you did for Lupe, and you were only there a week! Imagine what you could do if you lived there! There are women there who need you. And so do I, *mi amor.*" Reid moved deftly to her side, urging her up into his strong arms, and his kiss conveyed a love that had endured six long, lonely years.

"Two offices?" she murmured when he lifted his lips. "Are you sure I . . . we can manage that?"

He kissed her again. "Of course! I'll fly you across the country to keep up with your eastern clients. People do it all the time. I don't think I could stop you Loren, but after seeing you in action, I wouldn't want to."

"Then we'll keep this little town-house?"

"Sure. Who knows? I may consider a political career in the future. I've grown to love this city, too, especially if I can be here with you."

"I—I just didn't think of being in both places." She smiled with relief, stretching eager arms around his neck.

Reid's hands were stroking her back. "You should have known I would figure out a way to keep you this time. I couldn't let you go . . . couldn't leave you, Loren, I

have always loved you. From the moment I first saw you, first made love to you in that antique brass bed upstairs."

Loren giggled as a light giddiness overwhelmed her. She had wasted so much time worrying, wondering, mourning Reid's loss, even before he was gone, that she just couldn't shift her thinking so quickly. All she knew was that she wouldn't be losing him.

"You can have it all, *mi amor*. Anything you want." His kisses reached the pulsing hollow of her throat.

Loren arched against him. "Anything?"

"Hmmm. But not now. Although I want like hell to carry you upstairs to that little brass bed right now, I do have to leave for Arizona."

"I'll go with you, Reid. I want to be there." Loren was suddenly serious, and then she smiled, her blue eyes glistening with happiness. "I'll call Althea and tell her the good news."

"Break it to her gently," he murmured, burying warm kisses between her breasts.

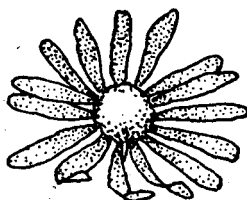
"Yes, gently..." Loren felt a great surge of joy rising within her.

"And don't forget next spring."

"Next spring?"

Reid's mouth was muffled against her skin. "In the bluebonnets... in Texas... you and me..."

Loren's laughter echoed against ancient brick walls and floated up narrow stairs past the brass bed, through the attic of the little townhouse on Prince Street. ♥



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—JEANNE GRANT—

“**B**ree, eventually your speech will come back. The battery of tests proved there’s nothing physically wrong.” Dr. Willming leaned forward, peering at her through thick lenses. “The mind has curious ways of dealing with traumatic shock. You’ll talk again, I promise you, sweetheart. Just accept that your body is asking for a little rest right now—and we both know you could use a lesson or two on how to take it easy, now don’t we?”

Bree nodded. She’d known the white-haired physician half her life and loved him to bits. Having seen more doctors than she cared to count over the last few weeks, she still valued Dr. Willming’s opinion most.

“Bree, it would help a great deal if you’d get it through your pretty head that you were *not* responsible for your grandmother’s death,” the doctor continued in that low, vibrant voice of his. “You *know* her heart had been weak for years, and

you *know* that no one could have done anything to prevent what happened. Now, I want you to get some solid rest and put a few hefty pounds under your belt."

Five minutes later, Bree escaped the good doctor's fiftieth round of reassurances and let herself out into the long corridor between offices. Her leather heels clicked a staccato rhythm on the shiny linoleum, slowing only when she stepped outside and faced a flat gray rain.

Maybe there was another city as ugly as South Bend at winter's end and in the middle of a downpour, but Bree doubted it. By the time she climbed into her car, water was dribbling down the nape of her neck, her hair was slicked to her scalp, and even her eyelashes were dripping. Shivering, she jabbed the key into the ignition, started the engine, and then, for no reason at all, leaned back in the seat and shut her eyes.

All this business about a "traumatized speech loss" was nonsense. Obviously, what she had was a temporarily loose screw. There was clearly nothing physically wrong with her; she'd never once flipped out in a crisis; a ton of people counted on her being dependable. . . .

Bree opened her eyes, shoved the car in gear and pulled out of the lot. A half an hour later she parked in her apartment's lot and noted, without surprise, that it was raining even harder than it had been when she left Dr. Willming's office. She made a mad dash for the door.

Inside, the gloomy day spilled in through her living room windows. Switching on a lamp, she unbuttoned her raincoat. Absently, her eyes roved over the furnishings she'd so painstakingly chosen a few years before, all creams and cocoas and browns—the neutral shades that had then been so popular.

Two weeks ago, she'd discovered that neutral, soothing colors drove her bananas. But that's only because you've turned

into a moody, spoiled brat, Bree wryly informed herself, and swept past the offending decor, striding toward the bedroom for her brush. A headache nagged at her temples, the same stupid headache that had dogged her every step for the last two weeks.

She wandered to the window, staring out mindlessly. Her entire world seemed to be crashing down around her, for no good reason. Gram's death had been the catalyst; still, it wasn't just the trauma of loss, but also that suddenly she was seeing everything through Gram's eyes. Her fiancé, Richard, for instance. If she'd had a few secret doubts about marrying him before this, she'd tried to ignore them. Richard was affectionate and smart and thoughtful and nice looking; what more could a woman want in a man? Gram had labeled him "sweet," the afternoon she'd met him, and pursed her lips as she'd made herself a cup of tea, only later adding absently, "Did you ever stop to think that even a molasses cookie can have too much molasses?"

Bree hadn't listened to Gram. However, she'd done nothing *but* listen to Richard since this business of not being able to talk. Good Lord, the man was happy extolling the merits of computer systems for hours at a stretch. Rationally, of course, Bree should have found the subject fascinating. She herself was a systems analyst, having chosen that field because it offered women good opportunities for promotion as well as more than adequate salaries.

"And you're bored silly," Gram used to say. "Don't you remember that as a little girl, the only thing you ever wanted to do was make perfumes when you grew up? What happened to the dreams, Bree?"

Dreams didn't pay the rent. Bree's salary from her boss Marie paid the rent. Bree's eyes focused on the stack of com-

puter printouts on her dresser, provided free of charge by her boss on the premise that work would get Bree's mind off her "little problem." Marie was incredibly talented at manipulating people, but she smiled and complimented so often that being used by her seemed like a privilege. Marie still paid well and had given her every opportunity to advance. Bree had never been too unhappy.

She was just unhappy now. During the last few weeks, everything seemed to bother her, and trailing her like a shadow had been a ridiculous, irresponsible, unforgivable urge just to pitch it all.

Bree gnawed at her lip, thinking of Gram, until a thin film of tears filled her eyes. She blinked back the tears, and when her vision cleared she found herself staring at the half open door of her closet. The edge of one suitcase peeked out at her, and she had a sudden, very inviting image of herself unpacking that suitcase in the South Carolina woods, in the loft of an extremely rustic log cabin, with Gram's things around her and no telephone and absolutely nothing intruding on her peace.

"Bree, I simply can't let you do this, darling." Bree's mother, Addie Penoyer, trailed her daughter through the airport lobby. "It just isn't like you to behave so impetuously. Honey, you can't possibly cope with a trip like this. Look how difficult it was for you to even buy the ticket."

Someone in the crowd jostled Addie; Bree protectively grabbed her mother's arm and glanced up frantically as the loudspeaker announced her flight.

"I wish you'd listen to me," Addie continued. "Richard called us last night and said you'd broken off your engagement. And Marie—she just can't believe you'd quit your job and leave her in a lurch like this. . . ."

With an arm around Addie's shoulder,

Bree determinedly steered her toward the terminal entrance. "This just isn't right," Addie continued distractedly. "All alone in that cabin . . . I'm going to talk to your father again; that's what I'm going to do."

Bree sighed. Her lips formed "I love you, Mom," and then tightened anxiously as she heard her flight called a second time. By the time she reached her flight's waiting room, her heart was tripping in double time and her nerves felt like tumbling Tinkertoys. "You're the last one," the blond stewardess told her cheerfully. "Have a good flight, now."

Inside the plane, another stewardess wanted to see Bree's ticket, and as she groped in her shoulder bag for it she caught her reflection in the small rectangular mirror on the opposite wall. At least the woman staring back at her didn't look like a wild lady with a screw loose.

Shoulder-length auburn hair, glossy and thick, framed small, delicate features. The chin was a little stubborn, but the green eyes were huge and downright beautiful . . . and makeup had done wonders for the circles beneath them. Maybe her skin looked a little oddly pale, but the cream silk blouse and tan linen skirt presented a crisply attractive image. She had the most beautiful smile this side of the moon, her father always told her.

Bree paused in the aisle next to her assigned window seat. To get to it, she was going to have to maneuver herself past an incredibly long pair of stretched-out legs. The man was dead-to-the-world asleep, precisely the activity Bree had in mind for herself, but in the meantime he was one more roadblock in an incredibly long week of them.

She bent over him and tried to whisper, "Excuse me." Unfortunately, no sound escaped her lips. Exasperated with herself, she sighed, and pitched her shoulder bag over the man to her seat. He

didn't budge.

Normally, she took her time about judging people, but this man was such an easy read. He was all the things that got a woman in trouble. His thick sweep of sun-bleached hair was disheveled, Robert Redford style. He had classic, good-looking features and barely a character line, though he must have been more than thirty. His skin was suntanned, out of season. The body was long; the shoulders would have made a linebacker jealous; and Bree had always had a low tolerance for Adonises. In the meantime, his macho Italian tailoring was still blocking her path.

She touched his shoulder, which accomplished nothing. An explosion clearly wouldn't wake him. Frustrated, she tried to climb over him modestly, but her straight linen skirt would only spread so far. Muttering under her breath, she hiked up her skirt and lifted her leg to take a giant step.

The passenger in front chose that instant to propel his seat back. Bree jolted forward, grappling for balance, and instantly felt two hands reach out to assist her, one curling intimately around her hip and the other splaying on her ribs. The contact couldn't have lasted ten seconds, ten seconds in which her shocked eyes locked with a pair of dark, dark blue ones. His weren't looking at her face but at the open throat of her slick blouse. It wasn't his fault that her breasts were all but mashed in his face, but no one, Bree thought irritably, had the right to wake up that fast.

"You're all right?"

Awkwardly, she tumbled the rest of the way into her seat, and then patiently stared at the big brown hand that seemed to have parked itself on her thigh. The hand lifted. Slowly. Nodding distantly in answer to the man's question, she bent her head to strap herself in.

Seconds later, the plane's engines vibrated into motion. Bree stared out the window at the dark night with its peppering of airport lights, but was well aware the passenger next to her was blatantly checking out the territory. Why me? she thought glumly.

"Are you flying farther than Charlotte?" he asked conversationally.

She shook her head no, trying to make the motion chilly and dismissing, and closed her eyes. Even his voice annoyed her, it was one of those husky, sexy baritones.

"Do you want me to get you a pillow?" he continued blithely. "I'll probably sleep through the flight myself. I've been traveling for more than thirty-six hours."

Unwillingly, her eyes blinked open again, and unfortunately his were there waiting for her. His lips broke into a wonderful smile at having won her attention.

"Hart Manning here." He extended his hand.

For the sake of politeness, Bree offered him her hand. His grip was firm and warm and—as expected—lingered far too long. His thumb brushed her wrist in a way that promised limitless sensual potential.

"You didn't say if you wanted a pillow."

All she really wanted was for him to shut up. She shook her head.

"Is there some reason you're not talking?" he asked. Luckily, the stewardess paused in front of them, diverting her seatmate's attention. "I'll be serving snacks in just a bit. Would either of you like a drink in the meantime?"

Bree's throat was parched. She parted her lips simply to ask for water . . . and then wearily closed them.

"Scotch for me," her seatmate said smoothly, but instead of looking at the stewardess he was studying Bree. A ripple of a frown dipped into his tanned fore-

head.

He said nothing until the stewardess returned with his drink. "The lady has changed her mind and would like a scotch as well," he told her.

Bree glowered. She hated scotch.

When the stewardess left, Hart Manning leaned closer and tilted her chin with his finger. "Look . . . I know how difficult it can be for you in public; I have a second cousin who's deaf. And if I could help. . . ."

He enunciated in clear, careful tones. Ideal for a lip reader. Frustration warred in Bree with an unfamiliar confusion. Something was wrong with her pulse rate. Something that directly related to the caress of his forefinger on her face. His fingers gradually dropped.

Bree bent down to get the notepad and pen from her purse. Her thumb clicked down the ball point with a vengeance. "Mr. Manning," she wrote swiftly, "I am neither deaf nor desperate. Lay off and we'll get along just fine."

She handed him the scribbled sheet. He burst out laughing. Not the response she was expecting. "But you can't talk? Don't tell me I misunderstood that."

She nodded.

"You've been ill, then," he probed quietly.

She shook her head.

"It isn't physical? But then . . . why?"

Bree decided to ignore him. She bet a lot of women had mistaken the timbre of that seductive baritone for sympathy. She had already figured out that the man was downright nosy.

Unfastening her seat belt, she curled a leg under her and leaned back against the headrest. Closing her eyes, she curled up toward the window—as far away from her seatmate as possible—and fell asleep.

The mental pictures were so vivid to Bree that they never seemed part of a

dream. It was just . . . happening again.

Charcoal clouds drooped low, and snow pitched down helter-skelter. Bree curled a protective arm around the diminutive shoulders of her grandmother, and squeezed. "I don't believe I let you talk me into taking you out shopping in this weather," she scolded.

"Don't *you* start treating me like a senile old woman who has to be humored," Gram muttered.

"Now just wait here," Bree ordered her, as she grabbed the packages and settled Gram under a sheltering canopy of a department store entrance.

In four minutes flat, Bree pulled up to the store. She stepped out of the car, intending to motion to her grandmother. Bodies seemed to be deliberately obscuring her vision, and then someone moved, and there was Gram.

A man in a navy uniform tried to shield Bree from the small prone body . . . as if anyone could possibly keep her away from Gram. "I'm afraid it's a heart attack, miss," someone said, and Bree said fiercely, "*No!*"

Gram's face was ashen, her hand far too cool and weak in Bree's. "The cabin," Gram whispered. "It's for you, Bree, when you need it. Remember . . . fight for what you want, darling."

"Wake up. *Now* honey." Bree's eyes flew open as a strong hand shook her shoulder and a pair of intense navy-blue eyes fastened on her own. For a moment, she was totally disoriented to see a stranger's face peering at her with such fiece concern, but then she recognized Hart Manning. And before she was fully awake, his lips had curled into an immediately relaxed smile. "Whether you know it or not, sweetheart, there isn't a thing wrong with your vocal cords. You can scream like a banshee—in fact, you just did, in your sleep. And since you've

deprived us both of any possible rest, you may as well buckle up. We're landing."

Bree buckled up and stared stonily out the window.

"You have someone to help you at the airport?" he asked when they had landed.

Ignoring him, Bree hurriedly stood up, in a sudden rush to get off the plane, which had taxied to a stop. Hart stayed right behind her; she knew, because she could feel those navy eyes riveted on her back. And like a schoolgirl, she was conscious of bra straps showing through the silk of her blouse, of every motion of her hips . . . *darn* it.

She forgot him for an instant as she stepped off the plane and climbed down the metal boarding ramp. Sultry heat assaulted her in dizzying, shimmering waves, and the early morning sun was almost enough to burn her eyes. Still, she could smell the mountains. A three-hour drive and she'd be in the Appalachians; there'd be woods and silence, and the trillium would just be starting to bloom.

"So there *isn't* anyone waiting for you. I should have guessed," Hart said disgustedly.

She looked up, unaware he was still behind her until she felt his hand resting possessively on the small of her back, redirecting her steps to the right instead of the left.

"The baggage pickup is this way. You have to read the signs. You do read?" he asked conversationally. "Now, do you think you can possibly cope from here?"

"Yes," her lips formed frigidly. "I can cope just fine."

"Can't understand you. You've got an arousing pair of . . . lungs, honey. Why don't you use them?"

Hart stalked off through the throng of people waiting for luggage.

Richard would have helped her with her luggage, instead of leaving her standing there, the last one in the crowd, to face

a moving conveyer with nothing on it. *Where* were her two pale blue suitcases?

Twenty minutes, two phone calls and seven pieces of paper later, Bree finally found her luggage and stalked off in search of her rental car.

She became abruptly alert as she neared the rent-a-car desk. Hart Manning was there, bent over the long counter as he filled out some forms.

Bree bolted for the farthest clerk as she rapidly smoothed her blouse and flicked back her hair.

The young redheaded man across the counter glanced up, indicating it was her turn.

It took several seconds for him to readjust his eyes down from her face to the piece of paper her hand was frantically waving. "Bree Penoyer, a month's car rental, huh?"

He returned a moment later with a boyish shrug. "You sure it's under that name?"

Bree closed her eyes in frustration, dragging one hand through her hair.

"Now what's the problem?" growled a baritone next to her.

Fifteen minutes later Hart had solved the mix-up, and Bree had in her hand the keys to an affordable compact. "Thanks," she mouthed tightly and stormed out to her car.

Later on the road, Bree flicked her eyes in the rearview mirror. A navy-blue New Yorker was just behind her, and the driver had blond hair, eyes that matched his car, and a large, powerful hand that waved, all friendly-like.

Her polite no-thank-you's had gotten rid of any number of unwanted men—but she had a feeling they wouldn't work with Hart. What would? She would have to do something about him. Later.

For now, she inhaled deeply and remembered why she had come here. There was no other place on earth like the

mountains in South Carolina in April.

Soon there were no cars but hers and Hart's on the highway that led to Gram's cabin. Finally she pulled up the narrow drive and let a pent-up flow of weariness flood her limbs as she gazed at the cabin. A shake-shingled roof, log walls, a porch with a swing . . . Weeds had overgrown everything, but if the place looked disreputable to a civilized eye, Bree saw only happy memories.

A car door slammed behind her, jolting her from the past. She snatched up her purse and stepped out of the car.

"Who on earth would have guessed you were such a country girl?" Hart's eyes interestedly traveled the length of her, as if he hadn't inspected her a dozen times already. "I was positive there'd be someone waiting here for you—and there's no one. I don't know why I'm asking this, but do you at least have food in the place?"

She shook her head.

"So you don't even have a box of crackers. *Wonderful*," he said flatly.

All of this just had to stop. Still a very tiny corner of her brain acknowledged a wayward and totally incomprehensible attraction to him. Or maybe it was just that he intrigued her. Most men she knew backed off at a frown. Hart probably wouldn't back off for a bulldozer.

The vibrations warned her that he was a dangerous man, but he strode forward with an innocuous smile, hooking an arm around her shoulder before she could blink and drew her with him up the sidewalk.

Hart glared first inside the cabin, and then back at her. His voice erupted in a throaty growl. "You're actually planning on *living* in this place?"

There was no way she was going to sit still and hear that *man* malign Gram's cabin. Slamming her purse on a dusty wood table, Bree unsnapped the top of

her ball-point pen and bent over to scribble furiously on a notepad.

Hart was leaving, whether he knew it or not. And if he ventured one more amused comment about her inability to talk, he would leave with the iron frying pan, preferably connected to his head.

"I love it," a husky baritone announced.

Her writing hand wavered. Scowling, she glanced up.

Hart had taken his jacket off and was holding it with two fingers over one shoulder. Everything about him shouted sexual animal.

"Everything in this place is a hundred years old or more, isn't it?" he asked.

She nodded warily.

The cabin consisted of the main room, a loft, and a lean-to in back. A trapper had built it some 150 years before, and without sophisticated tools had hand-chinked and notched the logs to make a snug fit. Gram had lathered whitewash on the inside walls.

In one corner stood a functional spinning wheel and carder; beyond it was an old oak chest with white porcelain pitcher and water basin. Behind Bree was the cooking corner—the scarred converted dry sink, the ancient wood stove, the butter churn and vinegar barrel used to preserve eggs in the winter. A fat iron kettle still rested on the brick hearth.

"You don't mind if I take a look upstairs, do you, honey?"

"Wait!" Bree's lips soundlessly formed the words, but it was too late. Busybody was already ascending the narrow stairs to the loft.

A few moments later, Hart paused halfway down the stairs to close the loft's trapdoor, then took three more steps down and perched on a step, studying her. His lips curled in a perfectly wicked smile. "The place is yours?"

The lump in her throat felt thick and

heavy. Yes, it was hers. Gram had left it to Bree in her will. Bree crumbled up the nasty note she had started to write, and simply penned out a plaintive, "Please. Won't you leave me alone?"

In four swift strides, Hart was down the steps and standing in front of her. He chucked her chin with two curled fingers, and his eyes searched hers fiercely. "Whatever it is, it's not that bad. *Nothing's* that bad. Don't you dare get that look in your eyes again."

His fingers dropped, as quickly as if he'd never touched her. Startled, Bree let out her breath, but Hart already had his hands jammed loosely in his pockets and was casually looking around the room again. "Guess it's time I got your groceries," he said idly. "You want to make out a list, or shall I just buy the obvious basics?"

After a moment, Bree's lips formed a careful message: "Look, I don't want anything. Please just—"

"You know," Hart interrupted, "I've always believed that people will walk all over you if you don't stand up and shout about what you want in life."

He picked up his jacket from the kitchen table, where he had casually draped it earlier. "I'll be back."

He closed the door behind him, but that didn't stop his arrogant words from ringing in her ears. Bree felt out-of-control frustrated, and she soon sent a china plate hurtling toward the door.

The door popped open again. A lazy, devilish grin was mounted on Hart's lips like a trophy. "Tch, tch. Who would have guessed you had such a temper?"

She *didn't* have a temper. And once her nonexistent temper had calmed down, Bree leaned back against the closed cabin door and viewed her dusty domain with dismay. At least Hart was gone, but in the meantime wishes weren't horses. The place wasn't going to clean itself.

Apruptly, she rolled up her sleeves, looped her hair in a rubber band, and dug in. The cabin took on sparkle in direct proportion to Bree's taking on grime.

Bree was sitting at the kitchen table when Hart walked in two hours later. A sponge bath at the sink had moved a little of the dirt around; her chin was cupped in a weary palm, and her eyes were staring resentfully at the door.

"We haven't gotten over our temper, I see. Never mind, a little food will revive you." He plopped a bag of groceries down on the table in front of her and fished out several cheese sandwiches, biting into one himself and handing her one. "I didn't mean to be so long, but I got hung up in the real-estate office. Getting out of my lease may be a little tricky, but I think I can manage it. Been renting the same cabin for a number of years, but that glass trilevel place on top of your ravine is really something else. As the crow flies, we'd be within sight of each other, though would you believe that by the road it's a half-hour drive around the mountain. Anyway, if you have any objections to having me for a neighbor, feel free to say so." He paused, responding to the horror in her eyes with a smile.

She added to the list of things she detested about Hart Manning that he had no problem talking. *Ceaseless*, that mouth of his. Once he'd finished two more sandwiches, she thought he would leave.

Instead, he started cleaning up the remains of their makeshift lunch, then poked around the dry sink until he'd figured out how it had been converted, rambling on about the import-export business he'd inherited from his family, a firm that apparently ran itself and left him free to travel around the world.

With yawns and hostile body language, Bree did her best to communicate boredom. Staring pointedly at the door

only sent him in that direction to check the lock. He glanced back to find Bree slumped in a chair in defeat.

With a strange little smile, Hart crossed to the open cupboard, set a water glass in front of her, and filled it halfway with hooch. "After you finish that, have to be on my way," he said regretfully. "I've got a dozen arrangements to make today.

He splashed a little in a glass for himself and raised it as if to toast her. The man was mad. Bree stared first at him and then at the unwanted liquor, then lifted the glass and downed it all in one choking gulp. A violent shiver of revulsion raced up and down her spine, but he'd be surprised at what she'd do to get rid of him.

Hart chuckled. Before she could give the least thought to what he was doing, his hands reached for hers, pulling her to her feet. In some other world, she was feeling several very silly reactions to the feel of his strong brown hands on hers. It was worse when his right hand came up to push aside the strand of hair on her cheek.

At the foot of the loft steps, he draped both arms over her shoulders and leaned his forehead against hers. She could feel his gaze skim possessively over the dirt streak on her cheek, the sleepiness in her eyes, the shape of her mouth. Her flesh seemed suddenly too hot, and too cold. And in that sudden silence, her heart was suddenly beating, beating, beating. . . .

"I don't know what on earth you're running from, honey," he murmured, "but life's too darn short. You either reach out and take what you want or it's gone. Hear me?"

Vaguely. She was much more aware that he had tilted his head just slightly, that as he'd finished talking his mouth had stolen closer, that when he'd said his last words his lips were hovering over hers . . . and then taking possession.

Her breath caught in her throat at the shock of warm, smooth lips reshaping

hers, molding them to fit his larger mouth. She felt engulfed, tossed in some sea; she couldn't breathe, the smell of clean, strong man and musk smothered her.

It wasn't that she was affected by the kiss, because she couldn't possibly have been affected by a simple kiss, not from him. She was tired, that was all, tired and groggy and miserable, and the tiniest murmur escaped her throat when his arms slid under hers, when one of his hands suddenly pressed roughly against her spine, the other hurting her as he tugged off the rubber band in her hair.

"Sorry, honey, but that's so much better," he murmured with satisfaction. The auburn strands tumbled down to curl like silk around his fingers. His lips plunged down again. An arrogant tongue stole the moisture from her mouth, slowly probing into moist darkness he had no business probing. He was just . . . everywhere. She couldn't think. Bree, are you even slightly aware that you're glued to a stranger? whispered a polite voice in her head.

In a minute, Bree told the small voice.

Hart's lips slowly shifted from hers, pausing to press a lingering kiss on her cheek, then on her forehead. "Off to bed," he whispered.

A few of the vertebrae in her spine managed to stiffen instantly. The word *bed* did it. Hart had a certain way of saying it, and if he thought for one minute. . . .

He chuckled, gradually releasing her. "You know, Bree," he murmured, "I'm warning you right now—a lady who can't say no is irresistible." He sighed, touched a forefinger to her nose, and took four long strides toward the door. "I'll be back," he promised.

The next morning when Bree's eyes blinked open one groggy eye deciphered

nine o'clock on her windup travel clock. She'd actually slept for seventeen hours? And without a nightmare? Her stomach made an acknowledging noise, and she half smiled as she got out of bed.

She suddenly recalled the afternoon before, and her smile faded. She glanced first at the window, then to the bottom drawer of the wardrobe. In moments she was kneeling down and unlocking the wardrobe's bottom drawer. Gram's treasures were locked there, among them—the telescope.

Gram had been both a bird-watcher and a stargazer. Bree had other purposes in mind. Pushing the loft window open all the way, she held the scope to her right eye and squinted. Her yard dipped low, curving down into the woods of the ravine. She could just catch a glimpse of the pond's silver water; then the woods rushed straight up through a brambly tangle of underbrush. At the top, perched as though in danger of falling, was the house built of glass and stone.

To Bree's relief, the downstairs windows were still boarded up; the upstairs ones were closed. No car sat in the carport. Perhaps Big Mouth had decided to vacation in Hawaii, at any rate, he certainly wasn't there.

After dressing and eating breakfast, Bree grabbed a towel and soap, and left the cabin. From the crest of the hill, she had her first glimpse of the triangular pond.

The mirror of blue was mountain fed and never much warmer than melted snow. Bree sauntered to the water's edge, dipped a toe in, shivered, grinned, and froze as her fingers were halfway to the waistband of her jeans.

She wasn't alone. There was no mistaking the golden mane, even soaking wet.

Damn the man. Even if he'd managed to rent the house, he didn't need to have discovered the pond. *Her* pond, for that

matter.

About to take a fast hike back to her cabin, Bree hesitated, stooping behind some trees. Hart had dipped back under the water, his arms soundlessly slicing through the water. As he raced the length of the pond, his body skimmed just below the water's surface.

Disgusted, she realized he was stark naked. The next time she looked, he'd surged up not twenty-five feet from her, facing the spot where she was hiding in her cover of trees.

"Seen enough, honey?"

Bree froze.

Four steps later the water only reached his knees. Bree scrambled to her feet. The man had *no* shame. *None*.

"An honest-to-God voyeur would have chosen much better cover," he chided. "No nightmares last night? Talking yet?"

No, she was *stalking*. Back home. *Alone*.

In her cabin, an hour later, Bree had the telescope to her eyes, quickly scanning for Gram's old favorites, when accidentally she zoomed in on the house at the top of the hill.

Hart had taken the boards off the windows, she noticed. And there was someone in the upstairs window, rubbing a cloth on the dusty panes.

Bree abruptly lowered the telescope, readjusted the lens, and held it to her eye again. Not *someone*. A woman. In a shocking-pink confection that a brazen hussy might have the nerve to call a bathing suit.

It *certainly* hadn't taken him long to get established in the neighborhood.

She blinked again, squinting harder into the lens. Good Lord, there were two of them. The second came with tiger stripes. And that *child* didn't know enough to buy a suit that fit her.

Bree lowered the telescope, and grabbed a towel.

A little bath, a couple hours of sunbathing, then her projects . . . *Safe* echoed through Bree in one huge, disgruntled yawn.

At eleven that night, Bree collapsed on the feather bed. This once, she knew she would sleep. The day couldn't have been fuller, with shopping and swimming and a quick experiment with scents and an entire evening of baking. She was certain her nightmares were behind her.

But the dream came back in the darkest hours. Always, the end was the same. She'd let herself be talked into taking a frail old woman outside on a frigid day—her fault. They'd shopped for hours—her fault. She'd left Gram alone—her fault. She was the one who had let it all happen.

And the siren kept screaming in the dream, along with a silent scream that no one else ever heard.

"*Bree*. Stop that caterwauling and get your little butt down here so we can both get some sleep."

Bree's eyes flew open. Disoriented in the darkness, she glimpsed the illuminated hands of the clock next to her, 2:13. Vaguely, she was aware that her heart was pounding, her forehead damp, that the sheet was twisted around her.

"You hear me? If you don't come down, I'm coming up."

The voice was a low, lazy baritone, Hart. Unmistakable.

Bree frantically untwisted the sheet and groped for a robe. There wasn't one. She'd gone to bed naked because the night had been hot. She tripped on the quilt, trying to reach the wardrobe in the dark. Her fingers frantically touched the quilted fabric of her robe. Hurriedly wrapping the short garment around her, she rushed barefoot to the loft stairs. She took one step down, and two more—

enough to be able to bend over and look, blinking hard.

"Now let's not panic, I put on my pants, see? Nothing to get nervous about. Get down here," he ordered irritably.

Nothing to get nervous about? A double sleeping bag was spread out on the floor by the wood stove. Two candles were flickering in tin lanterns. And an almost naked man was glowering at her from the bottom of the wooden steps—and never mind his jeans.

"Honey, *don't* climb down a flight of stairs in a robe that short for anyone else, would you?"

"What the *devil* do you think you're doing here? How did you get in?" The questions tried to tumble from her lips, but though her mouth moved, she still had no voice at all. Instead she pointed menacingly at the sleeping bag.

"You didn't really think I was going to leave you alone here to scream your heart out all by yourself? And that contraption there worried me."

He motioned to the "bubbler" she had set up in the corner by the dry sink, where she'd played with a formula for perfume hours before.

"I had such high hopes when I first walked in here that you were making a little moonshine; it *is* a still, isn't it? But that smell isn't remotely related to liquor. In fact," Hart drawled lazily, "the scent has distinctly aphrodisiac qualities. Are you a witch in secret, Bree? Woops. I forgot. The lady isn't inclined to talk."

Hart twisted around, spotted her purse on the floor by the dry sink, and bent over, rummaging around in it until he withdrew her notepad and pen. "Just this one time—we'll do a little communicating your way. Against my better judgment. One way or another I'd like at least a *hint* as to why you get the screaming meemies at two in the morning. Unless you've got something better to talk about?"

He motioned her to the sleeping bag, as if he expected her to sit there. Bree stood rooted to her spot in the shadow of the stairs.

"Ah. We get the feeling the lady doesn't want to talk about it. Well, fine, Bree." Hart sprawled in a kitchen chair and raised one bare foot to the opposite one with a lazy yawn. "Believe me, honey, I can talk for two. You want to hear about the time I drove a car into a swimming pool? That's a good story."

My God, he could *talk*. Bree stood still for the better part of an hour and just let him rant on, and cobwebs must have collected in her brain, because she knew darn well she'd been staring at him for most of that time.

"Well . . ." The kitchen chair tipped down; Hart's feet dropped to the floor. "I think it's time we both got some sleep, anyway. This time I think we'll insure against nightmares, though. Do you want to sleep down here with me, or shall I take my sleeping bag upstairs?"

Her jaw sagged, just slightly.

Hart bent over and pushed one of his two pillows toward Bree, clearly making room for her on his double sleeping bag.

He opened the tin lantern over the dry sink to blow out the first candle. The second one was on the table. Bree, rubbing one arm absently with the cold fingers of her other hand, didn't move. His arrogant assumption that they were sleeping in the same room surpassed even his usual audacity.

His eyes leveled on hers over the flame of the candle on the table. "Don't be too foolish, Bree," he said in a low voice. "We both know I'm not leaving. And that you're not afraid of me." He snuffed out the second candle himself.

In the sudden total blackness, she heard him shucking off his jeans, then lying down on the sleeping bag, then . . . silence. A lonely, frightening silence.

One of her bare feet shifted forward, then the other. Moonlight bathed her profile in white mist for one moment before she walked over and crouched down, fingers blindly reaching for the spare pillow and quilted surface.

"Here."

He tossed a cotton blanket over her, most impersonally. Tugging it to her chin, Bree felt . . . ashamed of herself. There was no pretending she'd been forced, coerced, or browbeaten into lying next to him.

Minutes ticked by. Lying on her side at the edge of the sleeping bag, she was conscious of her own tense, weary limbs.

Like an abrasive, Hart had scratched the serenity she'd expected to find here—but she didn't want him to go . . . not just yet. She wasn't ready to face the darkness alone again. And whether it was crazy or not, she wanted, very badly, to be held.

"Nothing like sleeping next to barbed wire to relax a man. Not tired yet, honey?"

Hart propped himself up on one elbow, gently pushing her shoulder down until she was lying flat on her back. A huge, shaggy head leaned over her, so close his wet, dark eyes were only inches away, so close the male smell of him surrounded her. "Want to know a very good cure for insomnia?"

Bree shook her head. She was crazy, not stupid.

"Honey's the cure," he murmured. "A spoonful at a time. You thought I meant making love, didn't you, Bree? Put your hands on my shoulders," he whispered.

She shook her head again, alarmed.

"Now, Bree." He might have been scolding a recalcitrant child. He lifted one of her limp arms and locked it around his neck, then the other. With one smooth motion, he pushed aside the cotton

blanket and lay down on his side, cocooning Bree in his arms.

Like the stroke of a velvet feather, his palms slid down her shoulders to the small of her back, moved back up to gently push her cheek to the hollow of his shoulder, then back down again.

He stroked . . . and he stroked. Arms loosely around his neck, face buried against embarrassment in the warm flesh of his shoulder, Bree closed her eyes. If the sexual vibrations were powerful, her need to be held was infinitely more powerful. Snuggled close to Hart, she felt irrationally certain that she could take care of herself tomorrow if he would just handle the night.

"Bree."

Her eyes fluttered open.

Hart cleared his throat. "I don't know if this is doing something good for your insomnia, honey, but it's sure wreaking havoc with mine."

Instantly, she tried to back away from him. Just as instantly, his arms tightened around her. "I didn't say I didn't like it," he growled. "Stay where you are."

She stayed, very still. For a minute or so. There seemed to be a perverse demon in her head, though, because after a minute passed she shifted her cheek, just a little. Enough so that her smooth, warm lips suddenly lay against the hollow of Hart's throat, and rested there.

Hart growled again. This time the sound rumbled from deep within his chest cavity. "Don't tell me the woman's decided to come out of hiding?"

She was curious, that was all. Surely any woman who'd been quiet, morally upstanding, and sensible all her life had a secret wish to be ravished, just a little, by an unprincipled, good-looking rogue who knew too much about women?

And Hart did have a gift for making the nightmares go away. *Dammit*. His mouth dragged a slow chain of kisses down her

throat, down toward the V of her robe. A foglike cotton clouded her brain; her heart was becoming utterly confused, pumping in double time.

There was too much of him. Everywhere. He moved with the lethal slowness of a mountain cougar, his lips prowling her vulnerable spots . . . behind her ear, down again to her throat, whispering dangerously around the quilted robe that just covered her breasts. Through a tumble of fabric, she was well aware that his legs had sneaked between hers, that his palm was making lackadaisical curls down her spine to her bottom.

Totally against her will, her fingers climbed his bare shoulders, traced the knotted cords in his neck, skimmed into the thick, rumpled mat of blond hair. Her eyes closed, the lids far too heavy to stay open. His mouth found hers in the darkness and molded itself to her lips, parting them.

Her neck arched back and her limbs turned liquid. Hart's tongue swirled inside her mouth, playing games with her tongue. Between them, her robe twisted open, helped no small amount by his hands. She tensed.

"You have beautiful breasts, Bree. Let me see."

He raised himself up just a little, very gently pushing aside her robe. His fingers traced the shape of one, around, beneath, making a circle, and then a smaller circle. A whispered murmur escaped her throat.

His eyes lifted to hers, all blue-black liquid. "Do you know what I want to do, honey?"

She shook her head.

"I want to make love to you. But you're going to have to tell me what *you* want, Bree. Do it, honey. Tell me. Tell me. You want me to make love to you, Bree?"

Yes. It was crazy and it was wrong . . . and she'd never wanted anything more.

Her body was sending out a frantic yes; he could hardly have missed the message.

He pressed one last kiss on her forehead before rolling over on his side. "I think you know what you want, Bree. But you're going to have to tell me when you're ready."

Bree stared at his broad back, a little stunned to be so abruptly deserted. So he'd suddenly turned virtuous?

Less than five minutes later, he was asleep.

Less than five hours later, Bree woke up alone. She knew there was no one next to her even before she opened her eyes; the warmth and the smell of him were gone, the weight of his arm around her waist . . . Bemused at the sudden flood of memories, her eyes blinked open.

Groggily, she stood up, shaking her head to clear the cobwebs. That didn't really work, nor did spashing cold water on her face. Folding up Hart's sleeping bag and blanket, she felt another sleepy rush of images invade her mind. Hart had pulled back, yes, and he'd done it in his usual insensitive way, trying to goad her into talking.

Pulling open the wardrobe, she grabbed a camisole top and jeans. By sheerest chance, her eyes settled on the telescope. It was supposed to go in the bottom drawer, not on the floor of the wardrobe, and enroute to putting it away properly she lifted it to the window.

There was action at the house on the top of the ravine. The bare cement patio was about to be crowded with lawn furniture. A single chaise longue was already there. So was Hart, wielding one end of a white wrought-iron table. A little brunette was wielding the other end, laughing, dressed in a pair of indecently short shorts and an open-necked blouse.

Call me when you evolve, she thought crisply. *Snakes* went into heat less often than Hart Manning did.

After breakfast, Bree squinted into the dark corners of Gram's old shed, stepped over an old wooden crate and sighed. The front yard needed mowing. Unfortunately, most of Gram's tools seemed to have disappeared. There was nothing remotely resembling a lawn mower or even clippers.

Gingerly lifting a scythe from its hook, Bree took it outside and wielded it awkwardly in the sunlight with a stubborn cast to her chin.

Three hours later, Bree collapsed flat on her back on the front porch of the cabin. She had just enough energy left to turn her head and survey the demolished lawn. The blisters on her palm were killing her; every muscle felt cracked like old leather . . . and she was grinning like a fool. She'd done it.

Yawning, Bree closed her eyes.

"*Exactly* where I was afraid I'd find you. Trying to nap in the middle of the day. It's no wonder you're not sleeping nights."

Bree didn't jump. Familiarity breeds contempt, as they say. If she hadn't actually *seen* him in several hours, Hart had still managed to interrupt every single occasion when she'd tried to get any rest. Besides, her heart instantly recognized him by pumping in and out like a windy bagpipe, even before she opened one eye—Hart not being worth opening two for.

As it happened, he was worth less than one. He wore a derelict straw hat sideways, his cutoffs showed hairy legs, and he hadn't bothered with a shirt, just a fishing pole.

His eyes were dawdling over her long legs in the short shorts. "Come on, lazy lady. Leading the life of Riley, it's no wonder you can't sleep nights. Did I mention we're going fishing?"

Bree simply glared at him.

"You want help getting up, or do you

think you can manage that all by yourself?" Hart shielded his eyes with a closed palm, his dark blue eyes peering down at her. "Honey, you have a button that's undone," he said politely.

Bree's eyes whipped open, her fingers groping for the front of her blouse as Hart lazily surveyed her front lawn. "You *did* do a little something today, I see," he drawled. "I'm not a big advocate of industriousness, but when it becomes too much of an effort even to open your mouth, I draw the line."

Hart's eyes narrowed on the scythe resting against the cabine wall. "You didn't use *that* to cut the lawn? You damn fool, you could have killed yourself! Let me see your hands."

The next thing she knew, Hart had snatched her wrists and turned up her palms for inspection. "I'm going to kill you," he announced darkly, "as soon as we wash these and put some antiseptic on them. Go ahead. Give me an argument, Bree."

In seconds, he propelled her inside to the sink. But in those seconds Hart's face was inches from hers.

His cheeks were red with rage. He hadn't shaved, his lion's mane was crushed beneath his hat . . . and his touch was infinitely gentle on her hands. A lover couldn't have touched with more tenderness. It was becoming an effort to keep hating him, in spite of his harem on the hill.

Later, Bree found herself trailing after Hart toting two fishing poles while he carried an open can of worms. As they approached the pond, she saw a canoe, tugged up on the stone beach and outfitted with a tackle box and two pillows.

Fishing, was it? A tiny smile of triumph hovered on Bree's lips. She knew, even if he didn't, that there were no fish in these waters.

"You get in first, lightweight," he ordered. "And don't get all prissy about baiting the hook. I'll do it for you."

Bree stepped into the freezing water with bare feet, and lifted her leg carefully over the side of the canoe.

"Put the pillow behind your back," he ordered. "And leave the paddles alone, with those hands. I'll handle that."

Orders, orders, orders. Bree leaned back against the boat cushion, crossed her legs, and savored the warmth of dappled sunlight on her cheeks as she anticipated the comeuppance she knew was awaiting Hart.

After Hart got them out to the middle of the pond, he lifted the dripping paddle inside and just let the canoe sway to and fro in the breeze. He reached for one of the fishing poles and frowned at her. "You're going to get your nose all sunburned."

Before she could stop him, he'd flipped open a tube of white cream and dabbed a streak of it on her nose.

Attaching a worm to his hook, he cast his line in the water, stuffed a pillow behind his back, pulled his hat down, and did a reasonable job of looking as if he were taking a nap.

Determinedly, she reached for the other pole. He *wasn't* sleeping, or he wouldn't have suddenly tipped back his hat in time to grin at her as she reached for the worm with her mouth all screwed up.

Having nothing better to do, and certainly wanting to sucker Hart along on this "fishing" expedition of his, Bree expertly cast her line and snuck a glance at Hart . . . who appeared to be napping again. He missed her move—a cast five thousand times better than his own. It hardly mattered, since there weren't any fish, but it was a point of pride. Only when she made an unobtrusive attempt to rub off the gob of white cream on her nose did she realize he was awake.

"I wouldn't," he said mildly. "You know I'll just put more on." Hart sighed, throwing one leg over the gunwale of the canoe. "This is the life, I swear. Sun, surf, and a silent woman. What more could any man ask for?"

He obviously loved it when she took his verbal bait, so she refused to show by even a flicker of expression that he was getting to her. Setting down the pole, she leaned back against the cushion, threw back her head and felt the sun beat down like a healing balm.

Hart suddenly lurched forward, pushing his hat back from his forehead, grinning at her. "You're relaxed, Bree, aren't you?"

She nodded warily.

"I knew you would be, if I got you out on the water. I thought to myself, She's smarter than that; she's lived here before and will know damn well there aren't any fish in the pond. It's an absolute delight to find a woman who'll follow a man's lead in this day and age. . . ."

In some vague part of her mind, Bree knew he was simply trying to rile her, but it didn't matter somehow. She parted her lips to let out a detailed torrent of abuse . . . and when her vocal cords refused to respond, something inside her snapped. Unthinkingly, she leaped to her feet, saw Hart's hands grab wildly for her, felt the canoe lurch violently. . . .

And the next thing she knew, she was over her head in the water. Icy water. She surged to the surface, battling furiously at her curtain of soaking hair, and swirled around until she spotted the canoe. Treading water and gasping, she took one look at Hart—who was leaning back against his cushion, roaring his head off—and determinedly swam toward the canoe.

"Now, Bree . . . It was funny."

She pushed. And pushed. The canoe rocked wildly in the water, but refused to

capsize.

"You are angry, aren't you, honey? Yell. Go ahead. Scream at me, Bree. Don't you want to tell me what you think of me, sweetheart? Come on, Bree."

She sent a furious wave splashing in his face, and then whirled around, starting a rapid crawl toward shore.

"Don't you want to fish anymore? Never mind, I'll see you tonight. I've got a dinner date, but I'll be there around nine. Lay out my sleeping bag for me?" He added in a roar, "And put some more antiseptic on you hand!"

Eight-thirty, and if Hart was actually going to arrive by nine, he was *not* going to find a doormat. After changing clothes, she made a trip to the old shed, and after that she dragged the old rocker out onto the porch.

By nine, she was waiting for Hart. Her bare feet were stuffed into a ragged old pair of men's boots. Her calico skirt was gathered at the waist and reached midcalf; above it she wore a drawstring peasant blouse. A straw hat perched on her head. She was the image of a mountain woman, and Bree hadn't forgotten the pitchfork on her lap. Maybe she couldn't talk, but then, they say actions speak louder than words. Hart should be able to figure out the general message.

When Hart stepped out of his car, her rocker started a furious creaking pace. This wasn't the lazy Hart of the pond but the polished Hart of the plane. His hair was carelessly brushed back, catching the silver of moonlight, and his shoulders looked mammoth in a cream linen suit—one of those Italian tailored jobs of his.

"Bree?"

With her booted toe, she nudged his rolled-up sleeping bag down the porch steps as he slammed the door of his car. The pitchfork remained at the ready. He hadn't been dining with any mountain

boys, not in that attire. The woman had undoubtedly been breathtaking, and if even for a *second* he thought he was coming here for a free dessert. . . .

"Bree?"

She rocked, her chin cocked at a stubborn angle. Hart stalked forward, his jacket open and one hand loosely in his trouser pocket . . . at least until his eyes finally adjusted to the candlelight and he caught a good look at her. His expression went blank, and then he slumped back, drawing a hand over his face. A shudder racked his body. Bree scowled. Another shudder, and suddenly his ridiculous guffaws were filling the night. With no respect for his suit whatsoever, he collapsed on the grass with his head bent over his knees, laughing in absolutely uproarious humor.

Bree leaped up and hurled the pitchfork off to one side. Funny, was it? She ran down the steps and began screaming: "You . . . *varmint*. You ' . . .

The croaking voice seemed to be coming from miles away. The hoarse whisper cracked and stuttered and creaked like a rusty record, but it gradually gained momentum. "You *skunk!* You egotistical, domineering, patronizing, know-it-all, interfering, insensitive, overbearing, pushy, sneaky . . ."

Still seated on the ground, Hart wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes. "Keep it up. You're doing terrific, Bree." He leaped to his feet, grinning hugely. Upright, he let out one more exultant whoop of laughter and started stalking toward her. "Honey, you're *talking!*"

Bree was not to be diverted. "You have the sensitivity of an ox. Dammit, you've been *cruel*. You're cruel and you're pigheaded—"

When she glanced back to him, her eyes narrowed warily and she folded her arms protectively across her chest and began backing away. He was advancing very

slowly, with a devilish grin that boded trouble for her sanity. "Hart, I don't know what you're thinking, but *don't*."

"You, lady, owe me a thank you."

"A *thank-you!*" she sputtered incredulously .

"Hey. You're talking, aren't you?"

Actually, she was still retreating, until the back of her skirt rubbed against the porch step. Her tormentor continued to stalk. "Now just *listen*—"

He raised his arms, clearly with every intention of snatching her. She ducked before he could and, grabbing her skirts so she wouldn't trip, darted out of his reach down the porch steps, and raced across the grass.

Finally, when Hart snaked an arm around her waist from behind, she collapsed on the grass.

They lay sprawled within feet of each other on Bree's haphazardly mowed grass. One minute she was flat on the grass, and the next she was sprawled in an ungainly mass on Hart's belly.

The sudden midnight gleam in his eyes filled her vision, and then cool, smooth lips rubbed gently on hers. "Listen," she said vaguely:

"Not just this minute, honey." He bent to place a row of kisses, a very neatly aligned row, from the tip of her ear, down the vulnerable cord of her throat. Along the neckline of the peasant blouse. One finger slipped the blouse off her shoulder. His other hand was sliding up the calico skirt, from calf, to knee, to thigh, to . . .

Before she could breathe, he'd wrapped his arms around her and they were rolling, over and over, down the slope of the spongy lawn. Even as they tumbled, his lips claimed hers with a fierce, sweet pressure; their legs tangled and for seconds at a time she felt the intimate weight of him, the power of him, the man of him.

She breathed in that scent of danger,

but there was no time. Roughly, swiftly, his hands were possessively traveling over spine and bottom and thighs; her heart was racing, racing. Breathless, they suddenly rolled to a stop. Bree was on top of him, her breasts crushed against his white shirt. She was breathless and dizzy and as on fire as she could ever remember.

He pressed a kiss on her forehead. Two more kisses settled on her eyelids, closing them effectively. Hart shifted, cradling her as he turned her on her side, his lips moving in slow motion, tenderly teasing, savoring. Very gently, he claimed her hand and coaxed it down to his thigh. Very gently, his palm glided over her stomach and ribs, pausing to cover a breast. Very gently he kissed her nose, her lips, her hair, and traveled down to the nape of her neck.

"Tell me you want me," he murmured gruffly. "Tell me, Bree."

She buried her face in the columns of his neck, pressing kiss after kiss in the open throat of his shirt as she unbuttoned it.

Maybe she was stark raving out of her mind. But if she was . . . it had to be with Hart. No one else.

"Tell me," he repeated.

She felt as if he were depriving her of life, when he shifted back from her and stood up. With a small smile, he tugged at her hands and drew her up in front of him. Not the wisest of moves. Her legs were Silly Putty. And her leaning up against him didn't make removing her blouse any easier for him. Seconds later, the delicate fabric lay in a soft white puddle on the grass. Hart dipped down to taste her moonlight-bathed shoulders. And neck. And throat. She tossed her head back restlessly.

"Now, Bree"

"I can't. I'm not sure I like you, Hart."

"You want me to walk away, Bree?"

He would; she could hear it in his voice.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Can't hear you."

"Hart, I want you!" she yelled irritably.

An instant later, he swung her up into his strong arms; his lips stayed crushed on hers as he carried her across the yard to the porch. Once there he situated the sleeping bag, undressed himself, then drew her down to him.

He tempted her with the light, with the warmth, with the fire, never pressing. It was her choice, to mold herself closer to him. Her choice to touch him, to open for him, to invite him intimately inside her, to risk the aching fear that he would take her high but not higher. It was Hart's choice to make intimacy natural between them, to ensure that she didn't come back from the skies until she was exhausted, and sated, and flushed, and damp all over, and . . . so exhilaratingly well loved that there were tears in her eyes.

Two candles flickered in the darkness. On the porch, wrapped up in Hart's arms with the sleeping bag for a mattress, bare as a baby and utterly safe, lay Bree, her cheek resting on his shoulder.

There was nothing to explain why that specific body next to her had turned her into a wanton, wild creature of the senses, capable of intense, uninhibited pleasure. Or why she felt comfortable with him now, when she knew darn well she should be reading herself a riot act of guilt, reproaches, shame, and disgust.

Thoughts whirling in her head, she spread a hand on his chest and watched the long blond strands of hair curl around her fingers. "Hart."

"Hmmm."

"I don't want an affair."

His lips brushed her forehead. "Your voice is still coming out a little rusty, but it's sexy as all hell.

"I mean it," she said firmly. "I don't

just . . . race into relationships. And I certainly don't—"

"Sleep around?" he supplied.

"It's not as if you don't have plenty of options besides me," she said dryly, thinking of the harem she'd seen through her telescope. Not to mention whomever he'd worn the cream linen suit to dinner for.

"Honesty's easier, Bree, but I'll try to read your mind. I went to dinner with an old man named Reninger, a friend of my father from way back. I had a gift for him, some jade carvings. That should settle your doubts about this evening.

"Now, I want my thank-you." He pulled her closer. "I want it now, Bree."

At breakfast the next morning, Bree plunked a spoon down in front of him.

"What's wrong, Bree?"

She slipped into the chair opposite him. "Nothing's wrong."

"Did I hurt you?"

"I don't want you to think I'm making too much of this," she said uncomfortably. "I mean, people do this kind of thing all the time without—"

"Without what?"

"Without . . ." She motioned helplessly with her hands, having completely forgotten what she meant to say.

"It was the most special night I can ever remember. You were beautiful, Bree. And last night was not a one-night stand, so quit trying to make it sound like one."

She was staring at him, a jumble of words jammed in the back of her throat all trying to get out at once, when there was a knock on the door.

It opened.

Bree lurched up from her chair. "Mom! Dad! What a surprise!" she said weakly.

"Darling! You've got your voice back!" Addie Penoyer's words came out in a delighted rush, tears filling her eyes as

she surged toward her daughter.

Bree hugged her mother back, suddenly laughing. "It just happened last night, or I would have called you, Mom."

"I don't care, as long as it *happened*. Darling, I know I should have wired you that we were coming, but I kept telling Burke that we just couldn't let you stay down here alone, we had to do something . . ." Addie tripped just slightly over the word *alone*; Bree turned tomato red, and behind her she heard Hart's chair scrape back.

"Look, Mom . . ." Bree started uncomfortably, but Addie, staring over her shoulder at Hart, wasn't wearing the maternally disapproving expression Bree expected. She squeezed Bree's shoulder, and then with a tentative smile offered a slim hand to Hart "Mr . . . ?"

"Manning. Hart, please, Mrs. Penoyer."

Bree pivoted around, startled to see Hart's normally cocky demeanor destroyed. "Mrs. Penoyer. I know how this must look to you, and I don't want you to think . . ."

Addie waved a hand in midair. "My daughter is *talking* again, Mr. Hart. If you think her father and I care about anything else—"

"Agreed," cut in an ominous tenor from the door. "Just because a man's clothes are strewn all over my daughter's backyard, I wouldn't want you to think we see any reason to be the least upset."

"I have every intention of marrying her, Mr. Penoyer," Hart interjected swiftly.

Bree's eyes whipped up. "Have you gone out of your mind?" she whispered.

"I realize how this must look to you," Hart started gravely.

"You can bet your sweet petunias how it looks," Burke agreed.

"Dad—"

"Mr. Penoyer, if I could talk with you

on the porch for a moment—”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Burke told Hart, then stalked out the door; Bree tried to dart out after him but was forestalled by Hart.

She could hear raised voices the minute both men were outside, and Hart must have had his hand on the outside door handle, because she couldn’t open it.

In time the door popped open behind Bree, and she whirled around. Burke walked in, and Bree’s jaw gently sagged. His irate mood seemed to have vanished. She offered her father a tentative smile, and ran outside.

“Hart!”

He half turned from his lazy stride toward his car. “What on earth did you talk to him about?”

Hart made a sweeping motion toward the yard. “If I were a father and came across a scene like that, I’d damn well kill the son of a bi—seadog.”

Hart opened his car door.

“Wait a minute. You still didn’t tell me what you said to my dad. Where are you going?”

“Home. So you can have a little time with your folks.”

No one said a word about Hart until later that afternoon when her parents were having coffee just before leaving. “When are you coming home? You’ve got your speech back, Bree—that’s why you came here, for rest and just to be alone through that rough time. But you’re yourself, again,” her mother said.

“I’m not ready to come home yet,” she said quietly.

“Because of him.”

“No,” Bree shook her head. “There are some decisions I need to make. About the work I want to do, the direction I want to go now. Everything’s . . . changed.”

“Because of a man you’ve only known a very short time,” Burke insisted quietly.

“Look, Dad. I know what your first

impressions were, but you’d like him if you gave him half a chance.”

“Burke, I really feel we should get going,” Addie interjected, her eyes darting from father to daughter.

“Yes.” Burke’s eyes searched his daughter’s face as he rose from the rocker. He smiled suddenly.

The smile didn’t register with Bree. She was busy gnawing at her lip, startled to hear herself defend Hart. Defend Hart? Heck, her dad hadn’t even been attacking him. And to defend him, the egotistical, pushy, chauvinist, who’d never offered her one ounce of sympathy, who had a harem of women up on the hill?

Dusk was bringing in mosquitoes. Dusk was also, not surprisingly, bringing in darkness. A simple fifteen-minute stroll down her backyard, around the pond, and up the ravine to Hart’s place had proved an obstacle course. Much of his hillside was made up of rocks and waist-high bramble bushes.

Clouds had begun seriously rumbling overhead. A thick tangle of branches blocked her view of the sky, but in the direction of Hart’s house there were still glimpses of lamplight. Way up there. *Still* way up there.

Mentally, she rehearsed the proper words as she continued climbing. *Hart, I don’t think you were listening to me last night, but I’m really not in the market for an affair. Shake hands on it?*

His patio was cement, braced into the hillside with steel beams. When she stepped onto the smooth flat white surface, a deluge of warm, utterly drenching rain greeted her.

“You look more drenched than the rat the cat rejected,” Hart drawled from the open glass doorway. “Let’s get you inside and dry. Your parents gone?”

“They left for home. Listen, Hart—”

“Listen nothing. Let’s get you into a

hot shower."

Stepping cautiously over the threshold, she shook her head firmly. "I won't be here that long. I just wanted to tell—"

The thought was difficult to finish when her jaw was dropping. Her eyes were taking in the incredible look of his living room. Somewhere at base level, there were the cream walls and matching carpet that the original owner must have put in. *Everywhere* there were boxes and string and brown wrapping paper. Resting on top of one package was an enameled vase, preciously scrolled in teal blue and rose and gold. A two-foot-tall porcelain elephant was sitting on the floor. An Oriental carpet was half unrolled. A harem of carved ivory dancing girls had been scattered on a table. More or less in the center of the floor she saw a legal pad and a pen.

"Where on earth did all this *come* from?"

"A delivery truck that wasted my *entire* afternoon. I'm surprised you didn't hear the noise at your place."

"I was occupied with my parents." She wanted to get another look, but, fingers dancing up and down her damp spine, Hart was coaxing her down a long hall, imperceptibly pushing. "Look, I am *not* going to take a shower," Bree said irritably.

"Okay," he said as she let him lead her directly to the bathroom.

Later, after showering, Bree stood outside the door to the living room watching Hart work. She took a deep breath.

It was like watching a bear playing with butterflies. Hart looked so rugged and huge, and yet the way he touched each item he unwrapped, she could see all the tenderness the man was capable of.

She cleared her throat delicately. "Is this stuff from the import business you told me you hated so much?"

"Yeah. Once in a rare while I get stuck

knuckling under like everyone else. I have three stores," Hart said absently, as he stuffed the vase back in the box. "San Francisco, Houston, New York."

He glanced up. Her eyes clung like tentacles to his loosely fitting shirt and baggy pants, which she had found and put on. He let out a roar.

"How long will it take for my own clothes to dry?"

"Hours. Maybe, years," he announced, and pushed aside a box to give her a space to sit on the floor. When she did, he smiled in an innocent, disarming way, just before his fingers pulled at the open throat of her shirt and he ducked his head for a view.

Thirty seconds later, he had whisked all the wrapping paper away, and lowered a startled Bree to the carpet.

"I didn't come here for this."

"Now, Bree." He flipped open two buttons, in spite of her hands chasing after him.

"*Hart*. Sex is a serious business."

He shook his head. "Honey, you're such a mental mess. Who on earth gave you your sex education, anyway? A nerd? Sex is *fun*."

She closed her eyes disgustedly. A mistake. Hart promptly leaned over to kiss them. Lips softer than silk brushed the delicate flesh of her eyelids.

He was doing it again, she thought dismally. Making her believe there could be absolutely nothing more right or delightful than fooling around with him.

His lips teased the corner of her mouth, nipping and gently biting until she parted her own. He waited then, eyes soft and silent on hers before he moved. His tongue flicked at the entrance of her lips, filling every secret moist corner.

"Honey." Hart raised his mouth. "I know you're hot for my bod, but try to slow down a little. I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

If it weren't for the dance in his eyes she would have killed him. "You know, the only reason I came over here was to tell you I didn't want any more of this."

"Tell me, then," Hart encouraged. Putting an elbow on both sides of her face, he cupped his chin in his hands, giving her all his encouraging attention.

"I just *did*. Affairs just aren't my thing, and I really don't think getting involved with you is . . . wise."

"You're right. Let's get serious, Bree." Using an arm for leverage, he vaulted off her and, when standing, reached for her hand.

"Arms up for my Valentino act." He raised her arms himself, hooked them around his neck, and slid one arm around her and the other under her thighs. As he carried her down the dark hall, her lips nuzzled his neck, trailing up so that her teeth could gently nip at his ear. Eyes closed, she let her fingers grope for the buttons on his shirt.

Bree knew darn well she was asking to be hurt—getting oneself involved with a womanizer wasn't wise; he'd never seriously talked about anything permanent and undoubtedly had nothing more than a summer fling in mind. Tough. He made her laugh; he made her feel *alive*, and every nerve ending now pulsed with wanting him.

All of her bravery dissipated in the doorway to the bedroom. Hart paused, suddenly looking down at her with dark, too-far-seeing eyes. "What's wrong?" he whispered.

"Could we . . ." She hesitated. "Hart, could we go somewhere else? Please?"

"You mean, somewhere besides the bedroom?"

"It's just . . . water beds and satin sheets and mirrored walls . . . it's not my thing. I feel . . ."

Slowly, he released her until her feet touched the floor, but he didn't let her go.

"Honey. I bought those sheets the day before yesterday. To seduce you on."

"Oh."

Hart pulled her arms back up around his neck, and then dipped his head to nuzzle the curve of her shoulder. "I outgrew one night stands about ten years ago."

With a small smile, she touched her finger to his lips. "Hart, you're totally destroying the decadent image you've built up."

For once Hart didn't smile back. "And is that an image you want, Bree? If you want wild, believe me I can give you wild, honey . . ." His mouth stole closer, and when he'd claimed her lips he never once let them go.

Thunder exploded in the night, and Bree instinctively curled closer to Hart's warm body. The clock next to her ticked past three.

A warm palm suddenly slid under her arm, over her ribs and behind her, very sneakily, making her smile in the darkness. "Still not sleepy?" Hart scolded groggily. "Not nightmares, though, Bree?"

"Not nightmares at all," she affirmed, and snuggled closer.

His palm made slow concentric circles on her spine, and only gradually moved up to sift through her hair. "The lady liked the satin sheets," he said with satisfaction. "She also liked the mirrors."

"She *never* looked."

"Oh, yes, she did." Even in the darkness, she could see the crooked smile on his lips as he leaned up on one elbow. His eyes were luminous, and suddenly there was no smile. "You trust me, Bree, did you know that?"

"I never said I didn't trust you," she countered softly.

"You didn't have to." His thumb rubbed the edge of her bottom lip. "I want to know about your nightmares," he said

quietly. "I want to know about the haunted look that sometimes comes into your eyes. I want to know what happened that was so terrible you couldn't talk about it. Can you trust out loud yet, Bree?"

"Dammit, what do you want from me?" she asked.

"Watch," he answered. His eyes gleamed down at her for just a moment before the magic started again. He seduced, with lips and tongue and the stroke of his hands. Not again; she was so sure it couldn't happen again.

Thunder crashed outside; wind whipped leaves against the windows. The darkness held mystery; Hart's eyes refused to close, holding hers, even as his hands molded her breasts, slid down the warm flesh of her stomach, and cupped that core of mysterious yearning within her.

Almost against her will, her own hands grew bolder. Her lips started a ceaseless whispered trail everywhere she could reach, on his shoulders and arms, on his throat and chest, up to his lips.

"Now," she murmured. "Please, now Hart."

Languidly, he shifted both of them, until she was no longer beneath him but on top. "Make love to me." He raised his head to reclaim her swollen mouth, the kiss was fierce, and his hands glided down the length of her in urgent encouragement.

Still, she felt swamped by a terrible feeling of inadequacy. She would die before she failed Hart as a lover. "I haven't . . ." she whispered awkwardly.

He refused to understand how difficult it was for her. Instead, he kept murmuring encouragements she could barely hear, promising her wonderful, terrible things, and with long, soothing strokes he coaxed her body to perch over his, until she could no longer stand the long, tor-

turous teasing.

A once-shy Bree turned exultant, bold, learning how to please him, testing the rhythms that made his eyes darken and his hips tense and his hands move restlessly over her flesh. She was loving him, not being loved, and for that instant it was utterly, totally enough in itself.

Moments later, Hart tugged her down to collapse against him. His breathing was still rough, so was hers; their bodies were damp and warm. "You asked me," he murmured, "what I wanted from you, Bree. Just that, love. For you to see, for you to shout it, that you're a beautiful, passionate woman, capable of unbelievable giving, strong enough to demand what she wants in her life as well. Look at you," he whispered.

She curled around him and snuggled to his chest, replete and exhausted and ignoring his utterly foolish demand. She loved him so much she hurt.

The next morning at breakfast Hart asked, "where we going for dinner tonight?"

"I wasn't aware we were going anywhere."

"Certainly we are. I had in mind a little steak over a fire at the pond, around six. I'll bring the steak; you bring the marshmallows."

Unreasonably disappointed that he wasn't proposing anything for the afternoon, Bree nodded. "All right."

At the cabin, just before six, Bree's heart thumped helplessly in her chest when she heard the rap on the door. She grapped the bag of marshmallows from the counter and opened the door with a winsome grin of anticipation that abruptly died.

Hart was on her doorstep, but not alone. Next to him stood Marie, her one-time boss, dressed in a simple sharkskin dress and white sandals, her blond hair

sleekly pinned in a French coil.

Bree promptly felt as underdressed as an orphan. Her eyes whipped up to Hart. He was looking at Marie, and they were both laughing so hard that neither of them had heard her open the door.

"Bree!" Marie turned with a startled little laugh and threw her arms around Bree in an exuberant hug.

"Your dad called me yesterday, and when I heard you had your speech back, I just couldn't resist coming! I knew you never meant to resign, Bree. I was just telling this neighbor of yours that I'd planned to take you out to dinner, so we could talk. I can't stay; my return flight's at midnight, and Hart says he knows this little restaurant—"

"Fine." Bree smiled brilliantly. The sensations were all familiar, being squeezed into Marie's self-imposed schedules.

"I was just telling him that you're the best systems analyst in the business." Speaking as she turned, Marie slipped on the wooden step.

Hart grabbed her arm. Bree's eyes were fixed on his long brown fingers clutching Marie's white sleeve, on the fluttering smile Marie cocked up at him, on the closeness of their two bodies and the late-afternoon sun pouring down on them. It hadn't taken long for Marie to fall.

And Hart wasn't fighting it very hard, if he'd already decided on a restaurant, if they were already on a comfortable first-name basis, if they'd been laughing like old friends after only a few minutes' acquaintance.

Hart drove them to an expensive restaurant nearby, and Bree sat silently in the back seat as Marie was her usual charming self. Later, inside the restaurant, a black-suited waiter brought a bottle of wine. Bree tuned the conversation out and tipped the newly filled glass to her lips, delighted with the way the wine slid

smoothly down her throat. Amazing, how suddenly fascinated Hart was by the subject of computers. And Marie had been delighted to educate him all through dinner.

"So your company is based on field work, with a willingness to show up day or night no matter what the problem is . . ." Hart said.

"Exactly." Marie shook her head prettily, her dancing eyes never leaving Hart's face. "Actually, Bree sometimes worked forty-eight hours at a stretch—"

Hart smiled lazily. "But I'm sure you share some of the work load in the field yourself, Marie."

Marie chuckled. "I hate to admit this," she whispered conspiratorially, "but I'd be totally lost in the field. My job is to sell the services we have to offer."

"I would say you were a natural success," Hart said icily. "at selling Bree."

Bree stiffened, even more so as Marie stood up with a little laugh. "Come on, Hart. There's an empty dance floor out there, and you must be sick of listening to me talk about business."

Seconds later, Hart escorted Marie to the pocket-sized dance floor. The pianist was playing an old torch song, and Bree watched Marie's fingers seductively climb up Hart's shoulders, her head tilting back, her lips looking miraculously moistened.

Hart danced like a robot, amazing Bree. His mouth, she noted, was going a mile a minute. The lady in his arms wasn't getting kissed, she was getting grilled. Poor Marie.

Bree almost smiled, but couldn't. A clear-cut attack of jealousy would have been easy enough to handle, but she could hardly blame Hart because women fell all over him. She'd done the same, hadn't she?

The music ended, and the two were wending their way around tables, coming

toward her. Bree barely noticed. As if her hand were attached to another woman's body, she suddenly picked up her purse to depart.

"Bree?" Marie cocked her head in question.

"What's wrong?" Hart's voice was quiet.

"I'm going home," Bree said brightly, and swung her hips out of the booth. Hart's fingers curled on her wrist, but she shook herself free.

Once she was outside, she hauled great gulps of night air into her lungs. She was awake; there was no nightmare. She was standing in a parking lot filled with cars; still her hands wouldn't stop trembling.

"We'll have you home in twenty minutes," Hart's baritone was quiet and sure, coming from behind her even as he placed a supportive arm on her shoulder.

She shrugged it off, vaulting for the car.

"Bree?" Marie trilled. "My goodness, darling, what happened? I was just telling Hart that I wanted you to take more time off. You deserve a vacation, so make it as long as you—"

Bree whirled to face Marie. "I'm not coming back," she said crisply. "I've decided I'd rather wait on tables for a living." She'd reached Hart's car, and grabbed the back-seat door handle.

Hart removed her hand from the door handle of the back seat and was firmly trying to maneuver her into the front seat next to him. And succeeding. "I would prefer to sit in the back," she said flatly.

Tough. He only mouthed the word, but the pat on her fanny was very close to a push, and he grinned suddenly. *I'm proud of you,* he mouthed again.

Within a half-hour, Hart's headlights gleamed on Marie's rental car, which was parked by the cabin. They all rushed from Hart's blue New Yorker at the same time.

"Bree?" Marie straightened the collar

of her dress, standing in the darkness.

Bree suddenly stretched her hands out, meeting Marie halfway. "I apologize if I sounded rude, and I'm sorry."

Without a glance at Hart, Bree whirled toward the cabin. She heard Marie's car sputter and cough, and then die. Without turning around, she heard Hart offer to take a turn at starting the rental car. It wouldn't. She heard Marie say something in a panicked flutter, then Hart's blunt, "I'll put you on that plane. Believe me."

"Enjoy your ride to the airport," Bree called out brightly, slipping inside the cabin and closing the door.

It wasn't hard to find her sleeping bag, but there was the search for a flashlight with working batteries. Bree had no intention of being in the cabin when Hart returned.

Outside, she stumbled pell-mell toward the woods. In time, she made it to the pond. The stone shoreline was not the most comfortable of sites on which to lay out a sleeping bag, but she'd have to make do. Almost as soon as she'd lain down, she fell asleep.

The nightmare came back in the clouded mists of sleep. It started as it always had, with Bree guiding Gram through the stores, talking her out of carrying her packages, laughing as she ran to get the car. Then the dream turned into a nightmare . . . but this time there was no screaming siren.

"Damn you, Bree."

Her head jerked up. Instinctively, she cringed under the single harsh beam of flashlight in her eyes. Hart swooped down on her like a great offended bear.

He tossed some mosquito netting over her and tossed the flashlight aside before gathering her up, sleeping bag and all. His entire body was trying unsuccessfully to transform itself into a blanket, wrapping her up, covering her, securing her to his warmth.

She was still crying, and fighting very hard to stop. He sat down, still holding her. "This time you're getting it all out, Bree, and you'll do it right now."

The torrent of tears finally faded to a steady drip.

It seemed forever before she found her voice. "My grandmother was just . . . so special. She embraced life every morning, every minute of the day; she could make you believe in rainbows. . . ."

"And you loved her."

She nodded, sniffing. "And when she died . . . something happened. I'm still not sure whether I felt it was Gram I failed, or myself. Everything I'd always valued didn't seem important anymore. I wanted that joy of life that Gram had. So I dropped a perfectly good job; I wrote a dear John letter to my fiancé; I worried my parents to death. Hardly responsible actions."

"It isn't crazy to go after what you want in life. And as for your grandmother, I'm sure she'd be very proud of you." Hart shifted, trying to make a space for both of them to lie down. "You never disappointed her, Bree." Once he'd settled her on his arm, he hesitated.

"Marry me, Bree."

Stunned, Bree tried to search his face in the dim light. "You're not serious," she said.

"Of course I'm serious. You already know I love you. Whether you like it or not, you're in love with me. I don't really see that we have any other choice."

"You're full of peanuts. And—among other things—you just spent an entire dinner totally absorbed in another woman. Not to mention the beauties I saw bustling around your place like a harem of slaves."

Astonishment shone from his eyes. "What on earth are you talking about? What harem?"

"Hart," Bree said lowly, "you've had

more women helping you fix up your place than a hive has hornets."

A faint smile creased his cheeks. "Reninger has six granddaughters. I told you about him—the man I went to dinner with, the night we . . . uh—"

"I remember," she said stiffly.

"They've been friends of the family for years; I always see them when I'm on vacation." He added mildly, "I diapered most of the girls a few years back. The two oldest are twins, seventeen, and they both definitely fill out a bikini. Nubile or not, I usually manage to control myself where children are concerned."

"All right, Hart." Bree could feel a flush of embarrassment heating her cheeks.

"And as for my absorption in Marie over dinner, my sweet nitwit, I wouldn't have *had* to pump her if you'd been a little less stingy talking about yourself. I'm not saying I haven't been around, but fidelity happens to be one of those old-fashioned values I could never quite shake."

"Hart," she said haltingly, "you don't *marry* someone just because you love them. There have to be sane, rational reasons."

He said nothing.

"And my life is a mess—I—"

Hart interrupted quietly, "but I've never seen your life as a mess, Bree. All I saw was that you'd taken a turning you didn't like and were backtracking toward a different path. Perhaps," he added lightly, "I misunderstood a great deal. Because I never much gave a damn about 'sane, rational reasons.'"

He pulled her to her feet, and for a moment Bree stood absolutely still. She could see from the quickly masked vulnerability in his eyes that he'd simply known no other way to ask her . . . or that maybe she'd never given him much of a chance.

Later as they approached her yard, a

station wagon pulled up. It was familiar. So was the man who stepped out of it. Tall, dark, and attractive, he was dressed in a conservative summer weight suit, his shirt crisp. He peeled off his sunglasses when he spotted her. "Bree?" He sounded unsure as he gave the bedraggled lady in the yard a quick once-over.

Helplessly, Bree whipped her gaze back to Hart. For a moment, he just looked weary, and then he turned an ironic smile on Bree.

Bree cast him a desperately unhappy look. "That's my former fiance, Richard. And I didn't ask him here—"

Hart wasn't paying attention. He was striding past her with an arm extended. Richard, to give him credit, didn't blink an eye at the sticky handshake, just offered Hart and then Bree a rather bewildered smile.

"Bree, you're talking now? Your parents said—"

"I'm fine. I . . . just a minute, would you?" Bree's eyes zipped away from Richard back to Hart. Dammit, he was striding out of the yard without another word. At a dead run, she caught up with him, snatching at his arm.

"Just wait a minute," she said heatedly.

"There's nothing to wait for, Bree. There"—he cocked his head in Richard's direction—"is sane, rational marriage material if I've ever seen it."

"I—"

But Hart was heading for the woods, and Richard was coming toward her with a boyishly embarrassed expression.

"Bree? Did I interrupt something?" Richard at times could be remarkably obtuse.

She shook her head, swallowing tears.

"The minute your parents told me you'd regained your speech, there was no question I was coming down. I never really believed you meant to end our

engagement. I don't want to push you into anything, Bree, but I came to return something to you." He took a small, square box from his pocket.

Bree recognized the ring box and remembered well the night he'd given it to her. "I can't take the ring back," she said softly. "It's not because I don't care for you. I always will. Richard, I really can't be the wife you truly want—"

"Now, Bree. Let's talk about this," he insisted.

"Richard," Bree looked him square in the eye, and took a deep breath. "No."

As soon as Richard's car left the driveway, Bree flew into the cabin and up the loft stairs.

Reaching for a mint green camisole, she held it up to the mirror and decided Hart would like it . . . especially if she wore it braless.

The mint-green short shorts weren't exactly seductive. At least they showed off her brown legs . . . Bending close to the crooked mirror in the corner, she lavished on mascara, eye shadow, and her most delectable perfume. Her hair was a wreck, weaving every which way in determined auburn waves. One wave, when she worked with it, formed a seductive curl over one eye. Quitting while she was ahead, she raced downstairs.

Panting in the doorway, she took in a steadily falling dusk and started off for the woods.

It grew dark faster than was fair. If she hadn't been in such an impulsive rush, she would have taken the car. The bramble patch she walked into was worse than the one she'd tangled with the other night.

By the time she reached the top of the ravine Bree was hot, miserable, and distinctly unseductive-looking.

Climbing onto Hart's patio, she whisked what dirt she could off her shorts and ran her fingers through her hair. Irritably, she kicked off her sandals and brushed

her feet on his doormat so that they were at least reasonably clean. Lifting her chin then, she peered through the glass door, and when she saw nothing, arched a palm over her eyes to see in better.

A single light was on in his living room. She slid open the door and called out a tentative "Hart?"

There was no answer. She stepped in. "Hart?"

Wandering forward, she poked her head in the kitchen but found nothing except a predictable sinkful of dishes.

"Hart?" she whispered at his bedroom door, and then pushed it open a little. He wasn't there. The bed was made. *Too late, too late, too late*, her heart echoed. She forced herself to walk the rest of the way down the hall and pushed open the door to a spare bedroom she hadn't seen before.

The room was shadowed and dark. From inside, she heard a loud slosh of water that nearly scared her out of her wits, and then a giant surge up out of the darkness. Grabbing the door handle, she slammed it shut and leaned back against the opposite wall.

"Bree?"

"What the *devil* are you doing taking a bath in the dark?" she yelled. Her heart was beating like a rabbit's.

"I'm on the waterbed. You're welcome to come in." The baritone positively exuded lazy amusement.

"I came to tell you a few things," she called out irritably. "I'm not going to do all the cooking and cleaning up, you know."

When there was no answer, she raised her voice a little. "And I can tell you right now I'm not going to put up with the way other women look at you."

She waited, but there was nothing. Suddenly, there wasn't even the sound of sloshing water.

"Are you listening?" she asked.

He said nothing.

"Hart, I love you," she said helplessly to the closed door.

It opened as if by magic. "What the *hell* took you so long to get rid of him?"

"Richard?"

"Whoever." Hart scooped her up, ignoring her startled squeal. "I've been waiting for you, you know." His mouth hovered over hers, homed in. And lifted again.

"Do I really need this?" she asked the ceiling absently, and found the ceiling falling a distance away as Hart released her. On an undulating wave, she hit the waterbed.

"Did I hear you say you loved me?" he whispered.

She smiled. "I love you."

"Didn't hear you."

"*I love you, Hart.*"

"Honey, are you sure? Maybe if you'd shout it . . ."

Smiling, she scooted on top of him, pinning his legs with one of hers. "I'm sure, Hart," she whispered. "Very sure that I know what I want, and that's you. In my life. For all of my life. But you'd better be just as sure, because you know damn well we're going to argue a great deal—"

"No, we won't."

"Yes, we wi—" She stopped, gave him a rueful look, and zoomed in for a kiss. "Do you think you could prove just once that you can take a few orders instead of handing them out?" she whispered.

"Certainly,"

"Then put your arms around my neck."

He complied.

"And move your body, just a little. . ."

He did.

"Now make love to me, Hart."

Grinning he whispered, "See if I ever argue with you again, Bree." ♥

Suddenly That Summer

Widow Carrie Delaney is looking for a husband, and she knows that James Luddington is too slick and too sexy to be husband material. Instead, he agrees to help Carrie find a suitable mate . . . but somehow his schemes all lead Carrie back into his arms.

JENNIFER ROSE

Giving a sultry toss to her dark hair, Carrie Delaney grinned at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and vamped for all she was worth.

"Yes, the event that the men of America have been waiting for has finally arrived," she said giddily as she added a coat of mascara to the lashes framing her large hazel eyes. "The Widow Delaney, having mourned for a year and dated for two, has finally decided that the time has come to make

a New Life for herself and her darling daughter." She added in her normal voice, "Because the single life stinks."

Her zany monologue was interrupted when six-year-old Dannie, on a tour of their rented chalet, burst open the door.

"Dannie, how many times have I told you to knock on other people's doors before entering?"

A hurt expression crossed Dannie's elfin face. "You're not other people, you're my mother."

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Murmuring reassuring words, Carrie plunked Dannie down in front of the closet and asked her to help choose a dress for that evening.

Mondays at The Ladders, the Vermont resort where Carrie and her daughter were staying for a "single parents'" week, featured what the brochure had called Our Festive Cocktail Mixer—Enjoy A Refreshing Mixed Drink Gratis While Mixing With New Friends. Carrie was an English teacher, and the coy proliferation of capital letters set her teeth on edge. But never mind. She was here, and she was going to make the most of it.

A half-hour later, dressed in the yellow and white striped French cotton dress Dannie had picked out, Carrie kissed her daughter good night and gave instructions about bedtime to the sitter. Closing the door to the two-bedroom chalet called Zermatt, Carrie took a deep breath of the fragrant Vermont air, and, deep in thought, began walking toward the sports and entertainment complex.

After her firefighter husband, Gar Delaney, had died in a heroic rescue attempt, she had mourned for a full year. Then her mother and sisters and friends, even Gar's parents, had conspired to drag her back into the wild world of men.

She'd grown to detest the opening lines of men on the make, the sizing-up of intimate flesh, all the sad and seamy rituals of the mating game. She'd felt as if she'd been condemned to live adolescence twice—and once had been more than enough.

But after three years Dannie needed a new father, and—face it, Carrie—she herself needed love.

But Carrie had decided that sexual attraction was the worst possible criterion for choosing a man. In fact, the whole business of trying to fall in love

again was doomed. She should consider herself lucky to have had seven years of romance, and not expect lightning to strike twice.

But for Dannie's sake, Carrie vowed to make an all-out, do-or-die effort to find a decent man, a man who loved children, a man who, like her, hated being alone and would be thrilled to find a . . . friend. And so she'd ended up booking a chalet at The Ladders for a week.

The partnerless-parents-only week ahead offered a cornucopia of activities designed to break the ice. Toga Night, round-robin tennis doubles, a supervised sleep-out for children (clearly designed to allow their parents to sleep around), and an after-dark skinny dip. Tonight's mixer was probably the most important, though.

"Here goes," she said aloud as she walked up to the door of the complex. Plastering a bright smile on her face, she went in.

There were perhaps fifty people milling around the lounge. Scanning the throng, Carrie looked for the man who would make a decent companion for her and a loving father for Dannie. Just remember, she cheered herself on, you need only one.

Her eyes stopped. Her breathing stopped. Her heart hammered like a bongo drum.

On the far side of the lounge, leaning insolently in a doorway, a tall, reedy man with straight wheat-colored hair and flagrantly upper-class cheekbones stood surveying the room.

Conceding that he was easily the handsomest man in the room, she murmured a prayer of thanks that she finally knew enough to stay away from his type. He was like deadly poison in a crystal decanter. He should be forced to wear a label.

Persuading her eyes to focus elsewhere, she found a pleasant-looking medium-sized teddy bear of a fellow covertly glancing her way. Now, this was more like it! she thought, taking in the endearingly untidy brown curls, slightly bashful brown eyes, and unassuming posture. She gave him an encouraging wave.

Before he could get to her, the tall blond man had materialized in her space, smiling triumphantly.

"Hullo," he said, stressing the first syllable in an unmistakably British accent.

"Hullo, yourself," she returned, coolly mocking, as adrenaline coursed through her body, telling her to ready her defenses.

"I've got a fantastic idea," he went on, smiling lazily, dripping breeding and languor.

"Have you? Let me guess what you had in mind," she said. "We jump into the pool with our clothes on? Or find the circuit breaker and kill the lights?"

"Oh, even more outrageous than that." His gray eyes twinkled silver. "I was thinking that we could go directly to an amenable justice of the peace and get married. Then, instead of spending the week fighting the inevitable, we could have a glorious New England honeymoon."

Caught up in his inspired silliness in spite of herself, Carrie pretended to consider his proposal.

"I don't know," she began. "I love you with all my heart, but you're much too tall for me. Besides, you're English and I'm Irish."

"And don't leave out that you're a woman and I'm a man." His fingers found their way to her throat, setting a pulse beating jaggedly there. "How are we going to handle that terrible difference?"

Swallowing, she managed to get out around a suddenly thick tongue, "Yes, that's the real problem, isn't it?"

Carrie sensed a subtle shift in the air around them. She knew from experience what it was. The other men and women were chalking her and this man up as an item. Time to put an end to that potentially costly misapprehension.

"Frankly, beloved," she said crisply, "I think we should skip the marriage and go straight to the divorce. We don't have a thing in common."

"Don't we?" he challenged softly. His hand closed around the smooth flesh of her slender upper arm. "Which one of the scintillating men around here is more your type?"

Compressing her lips, unable to believe how her left arm sizzled, she said, "All of them."

"Oh, I see. It's like that." He looked puzzled and pensive for a moment. "Now that I think of it," he said, "I suppose you're right—we're hopelessly incompatible. That being the case, why don't we team up and try to find each other mates?" He let go of her arm.

She laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Why not?" he countered. "Finding partners is much too ghastly a business to handle alone. Perhaps you can even remake me and help me be more worthy of love. Tell me, what do you think of this sports coat?"

She fingered the wheat-colored raw silk. "It's a little too obviously subtle. Inversely snobbish. And it's clear that you got it to match your hair. Any woman with her wits about her is going to see it as a danger signal."

Putting his hand lightly on her shoulder, he steered her toward the bar. "I'll burn it in the morning. May I speak freely about your dress?"

That cool hand on her bare skin was having a peculiar effect. Finally she

managed to clear her throat. "Go ahead."

"I like the fabric," he said analytically, "but I'm not sure those fashionably loose lines do your figure justice." He placed his hands on either side of her waist. "You want to wear something that advertises how slender you are here." One impudent hand slid familiarly over her buttocks as he added, "And how beautifully rounded here."

Flushing feverishly, she slapped his hand away.

"Then I suppose that woman over there is your ideal type," she exclaimed witheringly, pointing out a statuesque redhead whose sleeveless black T-shirt and white cropped pants looked as though they'd been sprayed on her voluptuous body.

"Delectable," he murmured. "You must contrive to introduce us, after you introduce yourself."

"I'm Carrie Delaney. And what about a man for me?"

"I saw you eyeing that fellow with the curly hair," he suggested.

"Oh—my teddy bear?"

"That sounds right," he said. "Innocent, safe, machine-washable. But why don't you and I have a drink first and tell each other the story of our lives?" he went on smoothly. "If our chosen ones think we're attracted to each other, they'll be all the more intrigued. My name is James Luddington and I'm going to drink a black velvet. How about you."

Mocking his dandy's mixture of Guinness stout and champagne, she opted for the classic coolness of vodka with soda. Drinks in hand, they threaded their way through the crowd to a small table.

"To finding love," he said grandly.

"Oh, heavens," she burst out, "let's drink to almost anything else."

"That bad, eh? Want to tell me about

it?"

"No," she said. But he nodded understandingly, and a door seemed to open inside her. "Yes."

She told him about the two maddening years she'd spent trying to find a man who would make her feel the deep emotions Gar had aroused.

"Then I realized they broke the mold after Gar was created," she wound up. "And I decided I would be happy enough if I found a man who would love Dannie as a daddy and me as a friend."

"It was a good marriage, then?" He eyed her over the rim of his mug.

"It was a lovely marriage."

"And you and he—"

She shook her head. "Not a divorce. He died." Hurrying on to spare him the obligatory, uncomfortable "I'm sorry," she said, "I was just devastated at the time, but I'm used to it now. It happened three years ago. He was a firefighter. A hero. He died trying to save a child."

Suddenly she was hearing sirens wailing in her mind. "I don't want to talk about him anymore," she said. "Some other time, maybe. Tell me about you."

"I have a six-year-old son named Phillip. That's the most important fact about me. I lived most of my life in London, but I got lured over here by some people in Boston who think I have a knack with computers."

"Computers! Ugh!" Carrie said. "I'm sorry, that's rude, but I can't help thinking they're the enemy. You've had this reaction before," she added with a little laugh, noticing the expression on his face.

"Occasionally," he said easily. "I don't mind."

"Funny, but I can't quite picture you in Boston."

"No? Why not? Can't see me eating baked beans?"

"Oh, it's just my New York chauvin-

ism," she said with a little laugh. "I assumed if you'd been lured to the States, it had to be to Manhattan. You're tall and thin and pale—like our skyscrapers, you see. Boston is too red and stocky."

"Why, Carrie Delaney, I do believe you've just paid me a compliment."

"Never mind," she said crossly. "I'm glad I was wrong. I'd rather have you live in Boston."

He roared with laughter. "You're a character, you know that? In fact, I live in New Hampshire for the moment. A lot of the Boston computer companies have moved across the border. And a good thing too," he added, lifting his eyebrows, "because it brought me here. Last week when I got notice that my divorce was final, I decided that Phillip and I should celebrate by knocking off for a week of tennis. As I have every intention of marrying again, I decided to cross the river into Vermont and come to The Ladders."

"But you were just divorced," she protested.

"Yes, but we sunder our marriages in a less accelerated fashion in Great Britain. Jenny and I actually separated three years ago. Not to worry. I'm not on the rebound."

She made a face. "I wasn't worried. I'll let the redhead do the worrying." In a softer voice she added, "Were you badly hurt?"

He shrugged. "Our marriage was rather nice for a while, until my wife wrote a novel that all the critics went gaga about, and she decided that literature needed her more than Phillip and I did. It was a shock to have her leave. On the other hand, she and I have an easy enough time discussing whatever we have to discuss."

"On the other hand" gets to be a kind of theme song, doesn't it?" Carrie said

wistfully.

She picked up her glass, but it was empty, and she saw that his was too. It was time to move on. To her surprise—her dismay—she felt a certain reluctance to get up.

"Onward and upward, then," James said gently.

For a crazy moment she thought he had heard her struggling with herself and was taking pity on her, but he couldn't know her that well, couldn't care that much.

"On the way down from my chalet," he went on, "I noticed that several of the tennis courts have lights for night play. I was thinking you could suggest to my redhead and I could suggest to your teddy bear that we play a few games of mixed doubles. Somewhere along the line we switch partners and let nature take its course."

"You're on!" she said with a laugh, feeling less alone than she had in a while..

They stood up, and James caught hold of her hand and kissed it. "You're sure we shouldn't go find that justice of the peace?"

"Of course I'm sure," Carrie cried. "Hasn't every word we've exchanged confirmed how opposite we are?"

"All right, all right," James interrupted. "I still think we need an independent test. The scientific approach, don't you know. Besides, it will make our two friends wonderfully jealous."

"What in the world do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm going to kiss you."

With exquisite slowness he lowered his face toward hers. When his lips found their target, her body arched in a sweet agony of release.

Finally, on the verge of being lost forever, she managed to wrench her mouth from his. "Please . . . stop."

He released her, and his eyes flicked

over her face. "Too much feeling for you, my darling?"

She shook her head. "Too much vodka," she mumbled. "That's all. So I guess your test just proved that there can't be anything between us."

"Except friendship," he said. "Our doubles game and all. In the American parlance, we're pals."

"Pals," she echoed. "So I'll go line up the redhead, and you talk to the teddy bear." She held out her hand, and he gave it a vigorous shake. But his other hand went behind his back.

Was she just imagining things, or were his long, aristocratic fingers crossed?

Back in her chalet Carrie chose a simple white, scooped-neck tennis dress that was distinguished by a green cinch belt. As she hurried through the twilight to the illuminated courts, she hoped that James—no, her teddy bear—would like the figure-revealing dress.

When she arrived at the court, James introduced her to the teddy bear and Carrie introduced him to the redhead, Didi Hayes.

Predictably, she outrevealed Carrie in a snug-fitting T-shirt and barely-there shorts. James, in that inversely snooty way of his, was wearing ancient bleach-stained flannel shorts. Lew Richards, her teddy bear, compensated for him, though, with shirt, shorts, sweatband, and wristbands that had obviously just been taken from their original packages.

"This was a terrific idea!" Lew exclaimed nervously. Glancing up at a lopsided waning moon, he said, "I just hope we don't get too much sun."

Didi smiled at him. "Want me to rub sunscreen all over you, partner?"

"Nah, between shots I'll run to the shade."

"You're sure they're not getting too cozy with each other?" Carrie whispered

to James as they went to their side of the court. "I think they're falling in love."

James shook his head. "Not a chance. It's a coverup for the way they feel about us . . . only they can't yet admit to the feeling. Give them a half-hour of wondering what we're up to, and they'll be absolutely putty in our hands."

"Tennis, anyone?" James dropped a ball onto the racquet and sent it sailing over the net.

Lew and Didi both ran for the ball, then each stopped short to let the other get it. It bounced away untouched. James sent a second ball their way. This time they collided . . . and the ball again bounced away untouched.

Carrie couldn't suppress a wicked grin. "They better brush up on their teamwork," she said.

It was obvious almost immediately that Carrie and James were the superior team. Didi and Lew hit strong shots, but they didn't have the ability to think in tandem that makes good doubles players.

After an uninspired set that they won 6-1, James winked at her and suggested to Lew and Didi that they change partners.

"You be captain," Lew immediately said to Carrie, flashing an engagingly boyish smile.

Thrilled to be in the company of someone who didn't think he was the living end, Carrie felt her adrenaline level return to normal. "I think we'll do best if I take the forehand court when we're receiving. And you might rush the net more often."

A look of chagrin crossed his round face and Lew said, "I'm always afraid I'll get hit in the mouth. I'm a dentist," he went on, "pediatric, and I hate to tell you what a tennis ball can do to teeth."

Laughing, they moved into positions as James called, "Ready," and prepared

to serve.

She was so relaxed that his first serve was bouncing past her before she could get her racquet back.

"Nice," she called out.

"Nice; my eye," Lew muttered.

"That was harder than it had to be."

"Wait until you see what I'm going to give him when I'm serving. Bend your knees, Lew."

James won the first game without losing a point. As the two teams were changing sides he whispered to Carrie, "I hope I'm not being too much of a killer. I thought it would help unite you and Lew if you faced adversity together."

His breath was like a sensuous breeze against her ear. Furious at the spiraling heat in her belly, she retorted, "I plan to return the favor. Pal."

She sent her first serve spinning furiously to James's forehand. He slammed it back at her; and she returned it cannonlike to the baseline on his side of the court—and so it went for twelve exchanges, the velocity picking up with each shot. Finally James tried to drop a ball just over the net, but instead, it thudded into the net on his side, and Carrie took the point.

But James's shots to Lew arrived at a reasonable speed, as did Carrie's to Didi, and it soon became clear that two separate games were going on at the same time. At the end of the set, which Carrie and Lew won 7-5, the affable dentist suggested that maybe he and Didi should play singles while James and Carrie had their own match.

"Now you've done it," Carrie said to James as Lew and Didi moved off.

James chortled. "In the words of the poet, my darling, it takes two to tango."

"And stop called me your darling," Carrie said crossly.

The sounds of a leisurely rally came from the other court, and they turned to

look at Lew and Didi.

"Well-matched," James observed.

"Great. Where does that leave us?"

"Believe me," James enunciated, "I'm every bit as eager to be alone with Didi as you are to be with Lew. But things have to take their natural course—or at least the appearance thereof. We might stage a fight in front of them, for instance, and stalk off from each other, and then I bet you anything they'd trot after us to offer consolation. Do you think you could convincingly fight with me?"

Carrie folded her arms across her chest. "Without the slightest bit of trouble."

"Terrific." He smiled down at her, his eyes going silvery. "First I think I should kiss you again."

"You mean you kiss me and I struggle with you?" She swallowed hard.

"No, no. I can't have Didi thinking I'd ever kiss a woman against her will. So first we have a long, intense embrace, really whet their appetites for us, and then we play a couple of games of tennis, and then we have our fight. Let's get on with the kiss, shall we? And this time try to act as though you're enjoying it."

"Why, you—"

Still laughing, he brushed the words right off her lips, his mouth so tender that she thought she might swoon. "I can't win with you, my darling, can I?" he whispered.

On the fringes of her consciousness she was aware that she no longer heard a *thwack thwack thwack* coming from Lew and Didi's court. "They're watching us," she whispered to James as they both came up for air.

"That was the idea, remember? Play it for all you're worth." He put his arms around her. "I'll bet in high school you wanted to be an actress."

How had he known that? she wonder-

ed. Even though she'd given up that dream years ago, she still had plenty of ham in her.

Boldly untucking his tennis shirt from his shorts, she insinuated her hand against his bare chest. "I want you. I need you. I must have you," she declaimed with soap-opera throatiness.

"Oh, Esmerelda," he returned lustily, "you're mine then? Only mine? All mine?"

"As soon as you pass the test, dear Harold," she murmured.

"And what might the test be?" He dropped kisses into her hair.

"It's not for me to tell you. You must consult the oracle on the mountain." His heartbeat was mesmerizing her, turning her mind to mush, her will to modeling clay. Pulling back from his embrace, she said, "I think we're overdoing it. Let's play tennis."

They had taken a game apiece when Didi came over and said, "We've had it. We're both desperate for a drink and a hamburger. Join us?"

Carrie and James looked at each other. They'd been enjoying their tennis so much, they'd forgotten to stage their fight!

Winking at Carrie, James said to Didi, "Great idea. We'll just play a tie breaker here, and then we'll join you up at the bar."

"What's this all about?" Carrie asked suspiciously as Lew and Didi wandered off. "Look, he's got his arm around her."

James shrugged. "Doesn't prove a thing. You and I were kissing like crazy, and we know how little it meant."

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Oh, it meant more than a little to you?" he teased.

But it hadn't, she told herself. She was just a pretty good actress, that was all.

"I figured I'd be with Lew by now," she protested, "and here I am with you. And if we all have drinks together, I'll never get him alone."

"I thought," James said, "we'd have our drinks, and I'll suggest another meeting. Say a picnic tomorrow noon, with our kids. The bigger the crowd, the better the chance you can engage him in a tete-a-tete. Maybe we'll even play some sort of game that's bound to throw you together. And if all goes according to plan, I get Didi." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Carrie was relieved and depressed all at once. But anything was better than being alone at the bar, trading banter with man after man, feeling like a specimen being examined on a slide.

"Onward and upward," she said.

The next morning the group was to have assembled in front of James's chalet, where his silver Renault station wagon was parked, but when the Delaneys arrived, exactly on time, only the tall Englishman and his son were there.

James was wearing a silvery-gray shirt with his ancient Levis, and Carrie snorted inwardly. How like the conceited character to buy clothes and cars to match his eyes.

Tearing her eyes away from him, she held out her hand to a small blond boy. "You must be Phillip. I'm Carrie, and this is Dannie. She's six too."

The children stared sullenly at each other, and Carrie's heart sank. Maybe Dannie sensed that Phillip was going to grow up to be a dangerous man like his father.

Just then Lew and Didi came running down the road in tennis clothes.

"Sorry we're late," Didi called cheerfully.

"Were you out on the court?" Carrie

asked Lew. He nodded, grinning boyishly, and she added, "I hope you kept your knees bent." A scarlet flush burst into bloom on his round cheeks, and she gulped. Had he and Didi been playing more intimate games than tennis?

She looked at James with desperate eyes, but it was Dannie who came to her rescue.

"I want to sit on Lew's lap in the car," the tyke announced, countering James's suggestion that she and Carrie ride in the front with him. "And Mama next to us, then Didi. Phillip can have the front seat to himself," she added. "In case he gets carsick."

"Dannie!" Carrie said, chiding the rudeness even as she silently applauded the proposal.

Phillip stuck out his tongue at Dannie. "If I get sick, it'll be from looking at you."

James winked at Carrie. "Now you kids are even," he said mildly, "and we can get on with having fun. We'll sit the way Dannie suggested; and, Phillip, you can make the next arrangement that comes up."

Sitting with her blue-jeaned thigh touching Lew's bare leg, Carrie felt suddenly tongue-tied. Dannie made up for her mother's silence.

"Are you really a kids' dentist like Mom said?" she asked in an awed tone. Leaning against Lew's shirt, she cooed. "I like carrots and apples much better than cookies and candy."

To Carrie's delight, Lew put his arms around Dannie and indulgently praised what he had to know were exaggerations. Happy to let them begin to make a relationship, she tried to engage Didi in conversation. After all, she reminded herself, she had to make sure the redhaired reporter for *The Hartford Courant* wasn't a potentially heartbreaking best-selling novelist like James's ex-wife.

With a pleasant laugh Didi assured her that she had no interest in writing fiction. Frankly confessing to being thirty-five, she said she wanted to be on the city desk of *The New York Times* when her fortieth birthday came. By then her twin daughters would be starting college, and joint custody would no longer mean she and her ex-husband both had to live in Hartford.

The animated redhead grew glum as she mentioned her ex-husband, and Carrie instantly understood. Didi was still carrying a torch. She'd probably have to sample several different men before she was ready to commit herself again. Which meant that both she and Lew were still available . . . but she might hurt James, who was eager to settle down . . . oh, heavens, how complicated mating was.

James took them west into the Green Mountain National Forest, describing a waterfall and secluded picnic area he and Phillip had once explored.

The spot lived up to the expectations he'd raised. A narrow stream of water tumbled down between spruce trees. At the base of the falls a calm, shallow pool sparkled in the dappled light. A single picnic bench of weathered wood sat waiting for them.

Carrie exclaimed to James, "It's glorious here! Perfect!"

"Isn't it just?" he said smugly, as though he'd personally set the water flowing. "We could come back one night and camp out—all of us, of course," he added hastily, catching Carrie's wary look.

Didi and Lew wiped off the picnic table and started to set out lunch. Dannie was sitting on a log, reading a Nancy Drew mystery.

Phillip came running up to them. "Father," he began in his sweet British piping, "will you show me how to skim

stones? Mine keep on going *plop*."

"Sure, I will," James said, radiating fondness. "It's all in the wrist. Shall we give Dannie a lesson too?"

Phillip shook his head vehemently.

"Never mind," Carrie said quickly. "I thought she and I might go gather a centerpiece of some sort for the picnic table."

James gave her a look she couldn't quite fathom. "A killer on the courts, a peacemaker in the woods. You're an intriguing woman, Carrie Delaney." Before she could answer he took his son by the hand and led him down toward the water.

In her sternest interior voice she reminded herself that history was full of men who were good with children and impossible with women.

Her own father, Jack Benden, had been cut from the same pattern. Openly involved with a young, single neighbor, he'd gone on living with Carrie's mother, Maureen, "for the sake of the children," even though the setup had brought equal misery to his wife and his mistress.

He'd died before Carrie had met Gar, but she didn't need to see the two men side by side to realize she was, quite deliberately, marrying her father's opposite. And James and her father, with their gift of gab and greedy kisses, would have probably gotten on famously, exchanging pictures of their children while they drank black velvets and eyed the legs of passing women.

By the time lunch was over, Carrie was feeling less than sentimental about children herself.

Just as she had been about to seat herself between Dannie and Lew, hinting at a happy family unit, Phillip had said since Dannie got to assign the seats in the car, he would arrange the table . . . men on one side, women on the other.

Dannie had said the tarragon chicken

that James had bought was barfo disgusting, and Phillip had dumped his apple juice over the arrangement of pine cones, ferns and stones Carrie and Dannie had made for the centerpiece. When Carrie had unveiled her home-baked desserts, Dannie had made goo-goo eyes at Lew and virtuously said, "I wish grown-ups wouldn't tempt kids with sweets." Lew had to share an unadorned pear with Dannie, while James, Phillip, and Didi devoured the goodies.

Looking as though he'd never had a better time, James proposed a treasure hunt. They would divide into three teams, split up for an hour, and see which side could bring back the most items from a list he'd prepared.

As he scribbled names on scraps from a note pad and dropped them into a paper bag, he gave Carrie one of his sly winks.

Phillip jumped up and down. "Let me pick, Father, please."

Phillip drew Didi's name and looked shyly pleased. Carrie found to her astonishment that she was very relieved. Imagining James and Didi off in the woods together didn't sit well with her.

Dannie's turn came next, and she picked . . . Lew. She ran over to him and hugged his leg.

That left James and Carrie to go off to the woods together. Relief seeping away, she turned accusing eyes on him. He raised his broad eyebrows to suggest surprise, then frowned down at the traitorous paper bag.

But what was done was done, his expression suggested, and he handed out copies of the treasure list. One leaf that had turned an autumn color (20 points) . . . one pine cone free of pitch (15 points) . . . a stone with an unbroken band of white encircling it (10 points) . . . a big fat juicy worm (5 points).

Carrie tried to force her eyes to search for leaves and worms, her mind to dwell on the beauty of nature. But she kept being drawn back to the beauty of James's body as he led her up a winding blue-blazed trail that climbed alongside the rushing falls.

When they were all the way above the falls, parallel to a level stretch of the stream, James stopped to point out a phenomenon of nature. On the far side of the water, a maple tree stood waving, all its leaves a fulsome green except for a single scarlet branch that stuck out over a rock pool.

Carrie laughed delightedly. "It looks like a woman who's dyed one streak in her hair."

"Doesn't it just? Listen, you tarted-up maple, I'm going to pluck one of your leaves."

"What do you mean?" Carrie cried in alarm. "Are you out of your mind?"

He grinned at her. "Probably. But don't you want to win the treasure hunt? The prize is fabulous—a squirt gun in the shape of the state of Vermont. I'm going to win it for you, little lady."

Walking gingerly on the rocks that traversed the stream bed, he made it to the other side, plucked a single red leaf, and gave Carrie a triumphant wave. Starting jauntily back toward her, he grinned a hero's grin for imaginary television cameras.

And put one foot on a rock that came loose, and fell into the roiling water.

"James!" Carrie shrieked.

"The water's fine! Come on in!" he called, standing up, his saturated clothes clinging to his body.

"Idiot!" she yelled, her panic turning to fury.

His grin intact, he started toward her, then a log floating downstream clipped him behind the knee, and he fell back into the water.

When he stood up again, Carrie could see he seemed to be foundering. With a start she realized the stream bed had suddenly gotten deeper, the current stronger.

Yanking with all her might at an overhanging spruce branch, she managed to get the elastic limb down within his grasp. His movements still languid—this preposterous man!—he pulled himself to safety just as the current threatened to sweep him over the falls.

"Oh, Lord, James, I thought you were going to be killed!" she sobbed, tearing open his drenched and icy shirt, frantically trying to heat his chest with kisses.

"It was worth it for the cure," he said with a great sigh. "And look, my darling, I managed to hold on to the leaf. Am I not a right and proper hero?"

She pulled back abruptly and looked. Smiling like a small boy, he held up one very wet but undeniably scarlet maple leaf.

A memory surged up from the past: Gar grinning for the photographers seconds after he'd emerged from an inferno of a tenement, into which he'd gone to save a small boy's hamster. As the cameras had clicked, the building had collapsed. Another thirty seconds inside, and Gar would have died.

And the next time he had died.

"Dammit!" she screamed. "I don't want to be in love with another hero!"

Suddenly silence fell between them.

"Say that again," James commanded.

"No," she whimpered.

He let go of her, and for a terrible moment she thought he was going to strike her, so fierce was the expression on his face. But instead, he enfolded her with a tenderness that wounded her more deeply than any blow could have.

"I didn't mean—" she began.

"It's all right," he murmured, brush-

ing her lips with his. "Don't you know how all right it is? I love you, Carrie Delaney."

"No, don't," she pleaded.

"That seems to be one of your theme songs. Please don't make my body feel so good. Please don't open up my heart." He held her close. "I'm really not such a bad sort. I can get a letter of recommendation from my ex-wife."

"Oh, James, you've got to believe me," she begged. "It can't possibly work."

"Why can't it work, my darling?" he murmured into her ear. "Doesn't your every instinct tell you we were made for each other?"

"I know what you think—that I'm a coward," she said. "Running from the risks of love. But it isn't just that. There are . . . other things. My father. I mean, I know there are no guarantees in life, but I want the odds in my favor. That whoever the next man is for me, he won't wake up one morning and follow some other pair of legs down the road."

"Does a man have to have lived as a monk to earn your trust?" James asked, his eyes blazing. "You'd like to peg me as some kind of world-class womanizer because you don't want to admit that every kiss we've shared has knocked off your socks. Put it down to my unholy practiced skills, not to your own response."

"Stop telling me what I'm really all about," she burst out. "The fact is, whether you want to acknowledge it or not, the man I'm interested in is Lew."

He held her closer. "Promise me you won't rule me out. Tell me this feels as good to you as it does to me."

Closing her eyes, letting her lips drift to his, she longed to yield to the gorgeous warmth that filled her body and spirit. But she thought of the look on her mother's face when her father hadn't

come home for dinner . . . sometimes hadn't come home until breakfast.

Reluctantly pulling back from James, she pleaded, "If you care about me, you'll help me get Lew. He's exactly the man I came to Vermont to find. But really help me this time."

"All right," he said with a sigh, trying to sound gracious. "Whatever makes you happy."

Carrying one scarlet maple leaf, they started down the trail toward the others.

At five o'clock, back at the chalet, the telephone rang, and Carrie leaped for it.

"Hello?" she said eagerly.

"Hello, my darling pal," said a cheeky British voice. "I hope you're not going to break my heart and tell me that breathless greeting was in expectation of a call from the dry cleaner."

"Just because I was worried about you," she said quickly. "As any friend would be. You were pretty pale when I last saw you."

"I've had a restorative cup of tea," and an hour in a hot bath. I wish you'd been here—just for the tea part, of course.

Carrie sternly reminded herself that James Luddington was Mr. Wrong.

"Will you be up to going to Toga Night later?" she asked.

"I said I would, didn't I? Though, good Lord, Carrie, are we supposed to take the instructions literally? Wear bed-sheets with nothing on underneath?"

"That's what the invitation says," Carrie looked at the card with its Greek-style lettering. "Absence of underwear subject to verification. You may have to pay some dreadful penalty if you're caught."

"Well, if you're the one who administers the punishment—" James began.

"Never mind that," Carrie said hastily, trying to blot out the delicious

fantasy she'd begun to entertain along the same lines. "What are you going to do to pry Didi away from Lew?" she asked. "They were holding hands in the car coming home."

"They're nicely suited to each other."

"No, listen, James," Carrie said, her low voice intense, "I like Didi, and I'm sure she means well, but she's only going to hurt Lew."

"She's going to hurt Lew, and you're not?" James let out a snort. "You know he's not man enough for you, Carrie."

"I'll make him happy," she said defiantly. "I do like him."

"I know you do," James paused, and she could almost hear his brain working. "And I know whom you love."

"Dammit," she exploded, "is this how you keep your deals? You're just proving that my suspicions about you are right. Are you going to help me or not?"

Please, she found herself praying inwardly, let him say, "If you want to be a fool, my darling, you're on your own."

Instead, he apologized profusely—damn him—and promised to do everything in his power to help out. "I'll ask Didi to dance, and I'll contrive to get her to come away with me."

"How will you do that?" Carrie asked.

"Oh, I'll find a way," James said with his characteristic breezy confidence. "I'll suss out her innermost desire and offer to fulfill it. A double-dip chocolate cone, or something."

Glancing at the plastic grapevines festooned from the ceiling, Carrie had the uncomfortable impression that she was back at a high school theme dance. But apparently most of the guests at The Ladders thought Toga Night was great fun, for bedsheets abounded—sashed with neckties and clotheslines; accesso-

rized with sandals, running shoes, and one pair of saddle shoes. Sounds of merriment rang through the room.

A pudgy gray-haired man was making the rounds, flaunting an oversized badge that proclaimed him an official inspector. Watching several women flee from him shrieking, Carrie realized he'd put himself in charge of checking up on compliance with the no-underwear rule.

At last she saw Lew walk into the lounge and pause near the doorway, clearly needing to work up some nerve. Seized by a zany idea, she ran over to the gray-haired "inspector" and charmed him into lending her his badge.

Sauntering boldly up to Lew, she flashed the badge. "Hello there."

"Hi, Carrie." He seemed very glad to find a familiar face. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Why, is that an attempt to bribe me?" He looked bewildered. "I'm on duty. Dress-code inspector."

A mottled flush spread over his cheeks. "Er—" he began

"Never mind," she said hastily, realizing her joke had had the opposite effect from getting him into a party mood. "If you promise not to show me yours, I promise not to show you mine. I'll take you up on that drink, though."

"Sure." His big brown teddy-bear eyes swiveling anxiously, he said, "I was supposed to meet Didi here at eight, so let's get a table for four. You're meeting James, aren't you?" His voice left no room for uncertainty. He hoped she was.

"Well, actually, James and I have decided to let things cool down. We have . . . different values."

"You do?" He was sounding more alarmed by the minute. Glancing at his bare left wrist, he laughed nervously. "I wonder what time it is."

Consulting the clock over the bar, she said, "Eight-twenty. Don't worry, Didi

will get here. This is probably her first experience with toga draping."

Carrie led him to a table.

But where was James? If Didi got there before he did, Carrie was going to have trouble on her hands. She'd gotten off on the wrong foot with Lew this evening, and she needed her coach—if indeed he proved as clever at separating Lew and Didi as he'd been at getting them together.

Meanwhile, the safest thing was to get Lew to do the talking.

"Do you spend a lot of time in New York City?" she asked. She already knew his dental practice was located in Bronxville, a half-hour from Midtown.

"I come in every month to see my son." Wistfully, he added, "If I come in between my visits, I always end up doing something crazy like parking in front of his building hoping I'll see him come out."

"Oh, Lew, how sad. Didn't you . . . couldn't you—" She paused, not wanting to say something hurtful. "It's too bad you couldn't get a custody arrangement that makes you happier."

He pushed his fingers through his endearingly untidy curls. "The custody agreement when Phyllis and I split up—I didn't really know what I was getting into. She said the adjustment would be easier for Jason if he got used to thinking of Matt"—his pleasant face contorted, making it plain how much he disliked the man who bore that name—"if Jason could think of Matt as his father," he went on. "Especially since she was already . . . already expecting Matt's baby."

Carrie took his hand and squeezed it. "You deserved better than that."

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure. Jason wasn't much more than a baby himself, and—it's hard to explain." He shrugged. "Babies always seemed so

alien to me. Even my own. So when we wrote the custody agreement, I had no idea how much I would miss him. Now, every time a three-and-a-half-year-old boy comes into my office, I kick myself up and down."

Carrie thought about James and how he would never, under any circumstance, have surrendered a child of his. But her father had clung to his children, though it would have been kinder all around if he'd made a clean break. And Gar had condemned his own child to be fatherless when he'd died trying to save someone else's son.

"So incredibly complicated," she said aloud.

To her surprise, Lew's eyes brightened.

"Do you know," he began, "how good it is to hear someone utter those words? Thank you for not pegging me."

Coloring guiltily—she had, after all, pegged him within seconds of first meeting his eyes—she said, honestly enough. "I like you, Lew."

"I like you too, Carrie." He smiled warmly.

Her heart didn't skip any beats, but her mind danced a little jig. "I hope we get to see you after this week is over."

"Hey, that would be nice." Leaning forward earnestly, he added, "You've probably already been told this, but Dannie has a class-two overbite. It's cute now, but you'll probably want to consider interventive orthodontics. If you ever want a second opinion, on the house, just come on up to Bronxville."

Carrie's eyes darted to the various entrances, praying for James to materialize. Orthodontics!

"I was thinking more of getting together socially," she tried. "Maybe you'd come down to Greenwich Village for dinner with Dannie and me some night after one of your visits to Jason. Or

bring Jason down to play with Dannie. She's great with younger kids, and we have a rooftop garden complete with a sprinkler. I bet he'd love that."

Moved by her own words, she smiled softly at the picture of urban-but-green family togetherness.

"You're a gardener? Me too," Lew said enthusiastically. "I almost didn't come up here this week because my tomatoes finally ripened." He rattled on. When he began to discuss the aphids that were infesting some of his plants, Carrie excused herself and went off to the powder room.

"Delaney, Delaney," she said with a sigh, scrutinizing her reflection in the mirror.

She thought she looked rather appealing, in fact, as imitation Greeks went. The total effect of ruffled dark hair, luminous hazel eyes, toga, and sandals was of a nymph who'd just been chased by Pan.

But Lew wasn't chasing her. Hardly! In his own sweet way he was running as fast as he could—the other way.

Heading back to the action, ready to tell Lew just how silly she thought he was being, she was dismayed to see that Didi had arrived and Lew was dancing with her . . . and James was sitting at the table.

As he rose to greet her, displaying his bedsheet in all its splendor, she couldn't keep her eyes from straying down his lanky torso toward his middle.

Putting a casual arm around her shoulders, he said, "To answer your burning unspoken question—no, I'm not wearing 'unders.' I was brought up to play by the rules." He gave her a comradely squeeze and let his hand drop.

"So. How's it going?" he asked.

She gestured glumly toward Lew and Didi. "Do you have to ask? Look at them, dancing sheet to sheet."

"Sorry, pal. I did my best to help you."

"What do you mean, help me?" she echoed tartly. "You left me stranded here for forty minutes. What if Didi had showed up?"

"The reason Didi didn't show up earlier is that I abducted her. I thought the whole point was to give you time alone with Lew."

Questions flew to her mind. But she had no right to be jealous, she sternly reminded herself.

Her confusion turned to anger at him. He'd said he would help her get things going with Lew, and he hadn't come through for her.

"Well, it was the wrong kind of time alone," she snapped.

As if to underscore her point, Lew and Didi danced past them, and he slid his hands down her back and held her in an undisguised embrace. They were a classic mismatch of a couple—Didi taller by a good three inches and decidedly flashier—but neither of them seemed to mind.

"Well, then you've got to find some other way of getting your message across. Let's dance."

She shook her head, fearing she'd be lost again if she moved around the floor in his embrace. "We tried making him jealous before, and it didn't work," she said. "Anyway, I told him you and I had decided to let things cool down."

"Give me a little credit. I wasn't going to repeat myself. We'll dance with perfect decorum, and after a few minutes we'll cut in on them. Once he's in your arms, he won't be able to resist you." He gave her a reassuring smile.

Really, it wasn't fair that she and James moved around the dance floor as if they'd been designed to flow together. He was ten inches taller than she was. She should feel like a chipmunk dancing

with a giraffe. In reality, she felt more like Ginger Rogers dancing with Fred Astaire. There was no keeping her eyes open, or reality firmly fixed in her mind.

A fantasy took hold of her, and they were skating, alone on a crystalline pond. And a flock of Canada geese were arching their proud, long green necks and begging for bread crumbs. And it was night, and snow was falling, every snowflake a falling star, the wide black sky exploding with wishes, enough to fill a life. I wish . . . I wish . . .

"Thin ice! Thin ice!" called the geese.

Perhaps he heard them, too, and wanted to save her. Touching his lips to her forehead in the briefest of kisses, he said huskily, "I think we'd better cut in on Lew and Didi. Remember, cuddle up. It's obvious you're not going to get anywhere with this guy if you wait for him to make the moves."

"Hi, there," Lew said brightly as he surrendered Didi to James, not without a certain air of reluctance, and took Carrie gingerly into his arms.

"Hello, yourself," she purred. "It's nice to be your partner."

Laughing nervously, he stepped on her foot.

Nestling against him, she said, "Hold me a little tighter, and we won't trip over each other." He obeyed with a noticeable absence of fervor, and she leaned her cheek against his. "There. Doesn't that feel more natural?"

"Yes," he said weakly, pulling back.

Carrie felt dizzy, as skewed as a record being played at the wrong speed as they danced, awkwardly, across the floor. Finally, she could bear it no larger.

"I need some air," she said.

"Sure." He seemed relieved to disconnect from her.

They threaded their way around the plastic lounge chairs that surrounded the pool. The moon swung out from under a

cloud. A silvery mist was climbing the side of the mountain.

"It's nice out here," Lew said.

"Yes."

"Carrie—" He reached out and patted her arm.

"Yes?" She all but leaped at him.

"Yes, Lew?"

He cleared his throat again. "I know you're not in love with me," he said.

"Are you?"

She sighed. "No."

"Then why—" He cleared his throat again. "Why have you been coming on to me?"

She picked up a stick she saw lying on the ground and threw it as far as she could. "Because I'm not in love with you," she said.

"Frankly, I don't get it," Lew said.

"Romance breaks the heart. I married a guy I was in love with, and when he died I thought I'd die, and I don't ever want to be that vulnerable again."

Staring at her fingers, she went on. "I figured you might feel the same way. Because your great love worked out the way it did. And I do like you, and I thought maybe we could make . . . an arrangement. A marriage," she said defiantly. "I could tell from the way you looked at me at the cocktail party that you were sort of attracted to me. And I'd be good to you. You wouldn't be unhappy." The last words emerged in a rush as she sat down on the moon-washed grass.

Lew put a friendly hand on her arm. "I'm very flattered. Maybe I shouldn't be," he added with a laugh, "but I am because I think you're a decent person, and I guess what you're saying is you think I'm one too."

"You're more than decent. You're terrific," she said, meaning it.

He leaned over suddenly and kissed her on the lips. His mouth was warm and tender against her mouth . . . and the

kiss moved her not a jot.

He took her hands in his and held them gently. "I think I should tell you two things," he said. "One is that when I first saw you, I thought you were the woman I'd come here to find. When James got you in his clutches I was seething because I'm always losing out to tall blond worldly men. Matt, for notable instance. The tennis confused the hell out of me at first; but then Didi and I started sending off sparks and, frankly, I no longer cared what game you and James were playing."

"We weren't playing against you—except at tennis," Carrie said, feelings of guilt welling up.

"Oh, I know that." He ruffled her hair reassuringly. "We both know that."

Drawing a breath, he went on, "The other thing I want you to know is this. Phyllis wasn't my great love. My great love was a red-haired belly dancer I met when I was in dental school. She really fell for me, too, but everyone went crazy—my parents, her agent, the dentist who was going to take me in as a junior partner. They all said we'd destroy each other. I ended up marrying the woman who had the perfect profile for me—right age, right size, right religion, right profession—and she kicked me in the teeth. Some place to kick the dentist, huh?"

Smiling, he concluded, "You're nothing like Phyllis in character. You really are a lovely woman. But you're all those other 'rights.' You would never have kicked me in the teeth, but you wouldn't have made my world go around any more than I would have set yours spinning. Didi's the one to do that for me. And James, I suspect, is the one for you."

Looking earnestly at her, he said, "Aren't we lucky to have found them? And to have each other for friends?"

But Carrie didn't feel lucky. She felt like a child whose big beautiful red balloon had burst.

She told him she was touched that he'd spoken his heart to her. And she wished him every kind of joy. And she was going back to her chalet to pack and would head home first thing in the morning.

Carrie let herself into Zermatt, then stood breathless in the foyer, a hand over her pounding heart.

The babysitter, Gretchen, came padding out of the living room in her socks. "Hi," she said, shifting her gum. "You're home early. Playing tennis again?"

"Not tonight I'm afraid. I have a headache." Taking in Gretchen's crestfallen expression, she added, "But I want to pay you for a full evening."

"Oh, that's okay. Maybe Thursday or Friday you'll have a late night. That's the way it often works at these single-parent weeks."

"Well, that's not the way it's working for me," Carrie snapped. She knew Gretchen had meant no offense, but her words brought home the humiliating nature of this stay at The Ladders. "As a matter of fact," she added curtly, "we're cutting our trip short. I'm planning to leave tomorrow morning."

"Oh, no. Poor Dannie," Gretchen exclaimed. "She'll be so disappointed. Come on, I'll show you what I mean."

Carrie followed Gretchen into Dannie's bedroom. There, on one of the twin beds, lay the dark-haired girl snoring softly—in her sleeping bag.

"She's so excited about the sleep-out tomorrow, she asked if she could have a pretend one tonight. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course I don't mind," Carrie said softly.

She tiptoed into the bedroom and tenderly kissed her daughter's smooth forehead.

"Oh, baby," she murmured softly before she left the room. "I'm sorry. I thought I had a nice daddy lined up for you."

Passing the open bathroom door, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Really, Delaney, she scolded the pale woman in the mirror, you ought to feel ashamed, quitting after one little setback. Lew can't be the only fuzzy-wuzzy in the crowd, you know.

Out in the living room, Gretchen was busily gathering up Dannie's coloring books and crayons.

"I want to pay you for four hours," Carrie said. "And maybe I was a little hasty about going back to New York. I do want Dannie to have the experience of a sleep-out. And I did promise to take her to the Alpen Slide on Thursday. So let's keep our date for Thursday and Friday evenings. You'll look out for Dannie tomorrow night, won't you?"

Gretchen, along with the other regular babysitters at The Ladders, was slated to be a counselor on the fabled sleep-out.

"Of course I will. I hope that kid named Phillip isn't going on the sleep-out. Dannie really doesn't like him. She said that in the car today he told her he was going to throw up all over her."

Carrie ushered Gretchen toward the door. "That's not exactly what he said, but never mind. Thanks for telling me. Thanks for everything. Good night."

Carrie went into her bedroom. As she stripped off her sheet and bashed it into the linen hamper, she vowed she would never again wear a toga.

But would she go skinny-dipping with strangers? There was a "night swim au naturel" scheduled for tomorrow, when most of the children would be safely away from The Ladders on their sleep-

out. She had imagined herself having a pleasant dinner with Lew, having finished with the ice-breaking games, but scratch that foolish dream.

Looking into the full-length mirror, she saw a body that many women would envy and many men would covet. She knew that, naked; she could hold her own in any crowd. She *would* take part in the nude swim. If she felt uncomfortable, she could always leave.

If James were there.

A picture flashed into her mind, unbidden, unwanted. James, naked, his long body silvery in the moonlight, the epitome of animal grace.

Shaking her head, she turned away from the mirror to keep from being devoured by the hunger in her own eyes. She got the shower going full blast.

But the pummeling water only branded his name into her skin. James . . . James . . . James . . .

After a restless night, Carrie woke as the gray light of dawn edged her windows. Going to the kitchen and getting the coffeemaker started, she deliberately rattled and clattered, hoping to rouse Dannie. She couldn't stand listening to her own interior voices struggle to arrive at the rational conclusion that kept eluding her. She desperately needed her child's innocent presence to purge her brain.

Hadn't Dannie always come through for her, even when she was a tiny infant? This morning she was more than ever her mother's boon companion, rising cheery and chattery, full of make-believe stories about her night of sleeping-bag bliss.

Brushing back Dannie's long hair and kissing her soft cheek, she said, "Let's have an early morning adventure. Breakfast out."

Dannie clapped her hands. "Hooray. Just like in the city. At a counter?"

"We'll see if we can find a counter," Carrie said. She stood up. "Last one dressed is a rotten egg!"

"And the first one dressed has to eat it!"

Later as they headed out toward the parking lot, identically garbed in faded denim overalls, pink T-shirt, and sneakers, Carrie cast covert looks toward the main building. She didn't know whom she was less eager to see, Lew or James.

James, she decided, with stomach-jarring certainty. Really, the whole humiliating debacle with Lew had been his fault.

Suddenly the unpleasant truth she'd been groping toward tumbled into place. She'd been had. James had claimed they were playing a game together, but in fact he'd been playing a joke from the very beginning, and she'd been the butt of it.

Winding the reel back to the moment when she'd first seen him, she realized how devastatingly on target her first impression of him had been. The man was poison, and she'd made the catastrophic mistake of thinking she was immune to him when, in fact, she was as vulnerable as a babe.

Oh, what she wouldn't give to buy back her kisses, to swallow the unwise words he'd tricked her into saying!

Driving down toward the Sugarbush access road, confronted by the relentlessly upright mountains, she couldn't be less than completely honest with herself. And the bitter truth was, she'd been all too eager to be a co-conspirator in her own downfall.

She'd wanted an excuse, any excuse, to taste James's spicy kisses. She'd behaved with the reckless disregard for reality appropriate to a hormone-flooded teenager.

"Mom, look! Horses!"

Carrie looked, grinning. To her city-

bred daughter a pair of sluggish ponies in a corral merited breathless excitement. So did a stack of "silver dollars" at Pancake Pantry on Route 100, never mind the absence of counter and stools.

Dreading the thought of facing James, she persuaded Dannie that it would be more interesting to visit the pretty, polished town of Woodstock than to take part in the junior tennis clinic at The Ladders. But Dannie was frankly bored by the town and its grand white colonial inn. And Carrie found herself unable to look at the renowned hostelry without imagining sharing a bed with James and making the staid old rafters ring.

From Woodstock they went to Quechee, where a transplanted Irish glassblower named Simon Pearce had taken over an old mill. Here Dannie was fascinated by the spectacle of artisans at work, and Carrie was again tormented. For the riveting sight of glowing molten glass at the end of a pontil iron reminded her all too graphically of the way James transformed her body into an infinitely malleable blob of liquid fire.

After a long string of encounters with James in her mind, it was five o'clock, and they were back at The Ladders, where the overnight campers were assembling. And there James was, as real as stone, in a blue oxford-cloth shirt and a pair of rumpled khaki pants. And she realized that, if anything, she'd underestimated his power to thrill her and hurt her.

He ambled over to her and Dannie, beaming a thousand rays of connection.

"I missed you today," he said with elaborate casualness. The way he inflected his words made it clear he knew Carrie's absence from The Ladders had been a statement of her feelings about him.

Before Carrie could answer he pitched his next words at Dannie. "Did you have wonderful adventures? Did you see any

purple cows?"

"That's silly," Dannie said, but there was more admiration than scorn in her voice, and Carrie quaked. Unworthily, she'd counted on her daughter's continued allergy to the Luddington males. Her relief was palpable when Dannie asked, with genuine disgust, "Is Phillip going on the sleep-out?"

"He is, indeed, and I have a feeling," James said, "that you two are going to come home from the sleep-out very good friends."

Dannie looked up at Carrie, her expression what it might have been had he announced that there would be brontosaurus sandwiches for supper.

Fortunately, the head counselor for the sleep-out picked that moment to blow his silver whistle.

"Five minutes to blast-off," he called.

Pandemonium broke loose. While some kids were vocalizing their eagerness to get going, others were flinging themselves on their parents, begging not to be sent out into the unknown. Dannie got very quiet but brightened when Gretchen came in and gave her a big hello.

Fighting her own anxieties about their separation, Carrie knelt down for a hug.

"Give my love to the wishing star fairy," she whispered lightly. "Tell her my wish is for you to have a fabulous night."

"And my wish is for you to have a fabulous night," Dannie said with innocent fevor, bringing a blush to her mother's cheek. Then, giving a brave little wave, she grabbed her sleeping bag with one hand and Gretchen with the other and skipped away.

As the bus pulled away, Carrie was taken by surprise when a hand descended lightly on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Mama," James's voice said in her ear. "She'll do just fine. Phillip's an old hand at camping, and I

charged him to look after her or else, and never mind their little differences."

"Oh, terrific," Carrie drawled sarcastically. "There's nothing like being taken care of by a Luddington." Looking up at him, she glared angrily, then deliberately turned her head away.

"You're hurting," he said, his voice incredulous. "Because a man who isn't remotely a match for you had the good sense to know it? I saw Lew and Didi looking pretty cozy today, and I figured that had something to do with your absence, but I was sure a day's mulling would help you see things in perspective. You mustn't feel scorned, my darling. Surely you knew from the start what our game was about."

"You set me up," she said tensely. "I rejected you, and you decided you wanted the fun of seeing someone reject me."

He burst into laughter and tugged at her arm. "After a mouthful like that, you must be desperate for a chaser. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"I'm not playing anymore!" she shouted.

"Aren't you?" he countered quietly. "The centuries-old game of self-delusion?" He looked down at her. "Why don't you admit what you really are, Carrie? And what you really want?"

She forced a smile to her lips. "Oh, I have no trouble admitting to that," she said. Gathering all her courage, she said: "Come to the skinny-dip tonight, my darling, and you'll see exactly what I am and what I want."

Her lips began to tremble, and she turned quickly away, not wanting to spoil the effect of her needling words. But she had time to glimpse the dismay on James's face.

Returning to a thunderingly empty Zermatt, she invented a dozen tasks to keep from thinking about the tall blond

man she detested and the daunting prospect of swimming in nothing but her skin. She baked Dannie's favorite double-chocolate brownies. She ironed a white cotton skirt of her own and a rainbow-striped sundress of Dannie's, neither of which were truly wrinkled.

At last it was time to head for the pool.

"It's perfectly okay to do this . . . you're a grown-up now . . . the naked human body is just another part of the natural world," she recited under her breath, pulling on a hooded red terry-cloth robe over nothing whatsoever.

"A daddy for Dannie, a daddy for Dannie," she repeated. The words magically propelled her out into the night.

The air was warmer than she'd expected, and as she looked up at the diamond-studded black velvet of the sky, she began thinking she might actually have a good time. Judging from the laughter and giddy shouts coming from the pool, a number of people already were.

She was relieved to see that Lew and Didi were nowhere in sight. She guessed that all the couples who'd already been formed were off making private whoopee.

Standing on the farthest edge of the lounge area surrounding the pool, she watched as an athletic-looking woman with a long tangle of blond curls did a perfect jackknife off the diving board, earning applause and whistles from a group of men.

If she stood on the edge of the crowd much longer, she was going to be more conspicuous than if she took off her robe. She had started untying her sash with suddenly clumsy fingers when a tall, thin figure unfolded from a shadowy chaise.

"No," James said. Wearing a black-

watch tartan robe, he loomed over her. "You can't do this."

"No?" she echoed mockingly. "Did my mother send you?" She got one of the knots undone.

"You're doing this just to get back at me. Because you think—mistakenly—that I did you wrong."

As she got her sash undone he grabbed at the lapels of her robe to keep it together. Her skin sizzled where his fingers made contact, and she had to struggle not to moan.

"I thought you were so eager to see my body," she mocked. Keep talking, Delaney, say anything; just keep talking. "I promise you, you won't be disappointed."

She ripped her robe open, only to have him clutch her in a tight embrace, sheltering her body from the world.

"Carrie, don't fight me," he pleaded, his lips feathering her cheeks, her earlobes, her eyelids, her chin. "Don't fight yourself. I love you. And I think you love me. I'll make you happy, I promise. Dannie too. We'll all be happy together. It's meant to be."

She no longer had the strength to fight him—least of all with the hungry crowd waiting to eat her up if she managed to break free. Let her body have its desire for one night.

"I want to go skinny-dipping," she murmured brokenly with a child's absurd stubbornness, making one last effort to keep from going over the edge.

"Then I shall take you skinny-dipping," he declared. He held her tight against him, his hands painting circles on her back. "In private. We'll go skinny-dipping the way the good Lord meant it to be. But it will be coolish," he went on, "so we'll need sweaters and jeans and brandy and all that. Meet you at my car in fifteen minutes."

Running back to her chalet, she felt

like a puppet on a string. He had let her go, but he was controlling her every movement.

He was waiting when she got to the car, but he didn't look worried; he had plainly known she would appear.

She didn't ask where he was taking her. She guessed it was to the spot where they'd picnicked. When he took a right-hand turn off Route 100, she knew she'd guessed right.

As he pulled the car to a stop and turned off the engine, the roar of the waterfall filled her ears with an otherworldly music. Suddenly eager to get on with the unraveling of fate, she bounded out to behold a magical scene, hearing James trailing behind her.

The pool at the base of the falls gave off the trembling, anticipatory air of an enchanted pond. Had a unicorn pranced out to drink from the sparkling water, she wouldn't have been surprised.

James pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips against hers. She felt his arms become her legs, his head her heart, and all known boundaries of the universe dissolved.

"If ever I needed cold water, it's now," she gasped. In one fluid motion she stripped off sweater, jeans, panties, and sandals.

Standing before him, she allowed herself the satisfaction of hearing him groan with desire.

"I knew you were beautiful, but I didn't know you were perfect," he said huskily.

As he started to unbutton his shirt, she ran down the path. Scarcely aware that James had shed his clothes and was coming down the path behind her, she ran into the shallow pool at the base of the falls. The water nipped and stung her ankles, and she remembered from childhood that the only antidote was immediate, total immersion in the water.

She plunged in. Suddenly she was almost warm, flooded with a sense of fabulous well-being, and she threw back her head to look at the star-strung sky. James's moonbright face floated over to her. Embracing her from behind, he led her in a watery, weightless dance.

"Wood nymph. Enchantress," he accused her. "Be merciful with me, I beg you."

"No mercy for you, wicked man." She nipped his lower lip with her teeth. "You have many transgressions to pay for."

"Tell me," he pleaded, "and have done with it." Turning her, he held her body against his.

"First, you made me—" Her voice wavered. "Want you," she managed to say. "And then, you made me—" Gasping, all but sobbing, she was suddenly seized by shivers.

Scooping her up as though she were Dannie's size, he bounded out of the water and set her down on the bank. With complete disregard for his own dripping, shaking body, he grabbed two big towels and began vigorously massaging her fore and aft.

Breaking off abruptly, he clutched her to him, encircling her with his strong arms. "Say the words, Esmerelda. Tell me what I made you feel. First I made you want me, and then I made you—what, darling? Does it have four letters? Does it begin with L?"

Oh, heavens, how fantastic he felt! A thousand voices in her head cried out: Hold back!

"Yes, Harold," she whispered into his skin. "L-i-k-e."

Spanking her very available bottom, he groaned, "Oh, you witch, Esmerelda. What do I have to do to hear what I want to hear?"

"Remember," she began, "you must seek the advice of the oracle on the

mountain, or you will never pass the test." Then, unable to play another moment, she looked at him with beseeching eyes. "Please," she begged him in earnest, "please, James, let's have what we can have, and not—" Cold overcame her again.

Again he scooped her up. "A sleeping bag. Brandy. Me," he pronounced, lopping to the car.

The next thing she knew, he was pulling something shapeless out of the car, tossing it onto the soft grass, unrolling and unzipping it, shoveling her into it, and following *tout de suite*. As he yanked the zipper closed and took her in his arms, she felt a surge of warmth worthy of a tropical sun.

He brought his lips down to hers, at first just barely brushing the skin with a tantalizing lightness, then pressing home as though he wanted their very atoms to fuse. She answered his fervor with a frantic hunger of her own.

"Dearest," he said huskily, "how can it be that you seem so familiar to me? And yet I know that in fifty years you'll still taste brand new?"

A shudder seized her again, sponsored not by the cold this time but by his words. There could be no future for them, and he had to know it as well as she did. That fact wouldn't really be sad as long as they didn't lie to themselves and each other.

"Please—" she began, and he seemed to know what she was thinking for his kisses turned soft and contrite, whispering "Trust me" as they caressed her.

All too soon—yet not a moment too soon—they were two brilliant explosions, achieving their ultimate glory as they flew into a billion fragments in synchronous apocalypse.

As the bits and pieces of their being reassembled, James spooned her against him. Claspng her for dear life, he said,

"Tell me it was everything for you that it was for me."

"You know it was."

"Are you ever going to forgive me for making you fall in love with me?"

"Please—" she began, the usual litany of protests rising through the layers of satiation in her brain.

But this time he would have none of it.

"Carrie Delaney, I love you. And I know you love me."

Defying the laws of the physical universe, he rose and compressed all at once until, by any definition, he was kneeling.

As she looked at him open-mouthed, he said, "This is no joke, my darling—not that I was ever joking, even when I thought I was. For the last time: I want to spend my life with you, I want our kids to grow up as brother and sister. Carrie, most cherished of women, will you marry me?"

Twin tears slid down her face. "Why did you have to spoil everything?"

"Spoil everything!" His laughter was a hollow, ringing bark. "My God, but we have come full circle since the days of Queen Victoria! Now apparently," he went on, "it's undignified to propose marriage following what was obviously, for one of the participants, a mere athletic event."

"Oh, James, please," she began. "You know it wasn't any such thing for me. It's true, you have made my heart sing and my body dance, and I wish life were simple and I could think about the singing and dancing only and say yes to you."

"My dear love," James said, "life is simple. Brutally simple. We're born, and in the blink of an eye we die, and in between, if we're very lucky, two great things happen: We find people to love who love us, and we find good work to do in the world. And if we're exceedingly

lucky, the love and the work dovetail, and then we've really got it made."

"Yes, exactly!" she exclaimed. "That's one of the things I was going to say. How in the world can we marry if you have to live in New Hampshire and I have to live in New York?"

She should have known better, she realized an instant later. She should have realized that the wily man in whose arms she lay would never have brought up the thorny matter of geography, or any other subject, except to turn the talk to his own advantage.

For he was positively crowing. "Darling! I've arranged, you see, to move to Manhattan. Because the most marvelous woman said to me, 'You're too tall and slick and generally superb a human being to live anywhere but among the soaring towers of Gotham'."

"Heaven help me, I'll never utter another architectural metaphor as long as I live," Carrie cried. She added confidently, "But you're joking, of course."

"If you think I'm kidding, my darling, you only have to read tomorrow morning's *New York Times*."

"Uh-huh," she said. "A banner headline on page one—I can see it now. *Ludington Moves to Manhattan—Washington and Kremlin Analyze Computer Programmer's Change of Jobs*."

"Oh, dear," James nuzzled the back of her neck. "Did I tell you I was a computer programmer?"

"You certainly did," she began indignantly. Then, recalling their exchange of personal facts—had it been only a few nights ago?—she amended. "I guess what you said was you got brought over to the States because you had a knack with computers."

For a moment he didn't say anything, and she had the feeling he was weighing his words.

"Actually," he said diffidently, "I

dreamed up the first really affordable home computer. So my move to Boston was more a matter of my going binational than a matter of being hired for a job. And though my impending move to New York won't be page one in the *Times*," he went on in the same matter-of-fact voice, "I do rather expect I'll be the lead story in the business section."

All at once, snatches of magazine articles flew into her mind and assembled, a giant puzzle that was no less mystifying for being solved.

"You're one of the wonders of modern Britain!" she gasped. "Like Freddie Laker—and, good Lord, it's *Sir* Freddie and it really is *Sir* James, too, isn't it? My knight in shining armor!"

She knew he was telling her the truth, and yet it couldn't be; she wasn't ready for such a truth.

"But when did you talk to a *Times* reporter?" she asked.

"It was your doing, really. Sending me into the arms of a reporter."

"You mean Didi? But she's on the staff of *The Hartford Courant*."

"Yes, and what's her big wish?"

Carrie bit her lip. "To be a *Times* reporter."

"Exactly. And remember I told you I'd grant her biggest wish, whatever it was, to give you a little time with Lew? Her interest in coming up with a story that would make the *Times* notice her coincided very nicely with my interest in letting you know, in bold type, that I was serious enough about you to move my headquarters to New York, and the tax situation be damned."

She indignantly began wriggling her way out of the sleeping bag. "Get me my sweater and jeans. I want to go back to *The Ladders*, now"

James burst out laughing. "My dear, is that any way to address a Knight of the

British Empire?"

"You can take your knighthood and—oh, James, why didn't you tell me?" Her face crumpling up as he gathered her into his arms, she said, "Why did you let me be such an idiot?"

He covered her face with soft kisses. "Tell you what? That I was Mr. Computer? When it was clear from the moment we met that you think computers are the enemy? You're wrong, by the way, but we'll let that argument wait for another time." Burying his face in her neck, he went on. "Tell you that I'd been tapped on the shoulder at a Buckingham Palace garden party when you considered me suspect simply because I'd been able to spring for a raw silk sports coat?"

"But you had no right—" she began.

"I had every right. I love you. You love me. And it was pretty obvious that if I didn't take some desperate measures, you were going to doom us to a lifetime apart. And that, my beloved," he said, "was not a tolerable ending to this story."

"No . . . no! You're still wrong for me," she burst out. "Wronger than ever!"

His face underwent a lightning change, the tenderness giving way to anger and impatience.

"Why?" he demanded gratingly. "Because it's more than ever obvious how extraordinarily happy we would be? That's the one thing no man is allowed to do, isn't it? Make you happier than Gar made you. But, really, that's not as difficult a proposition as you would like to make out, is it, my Carrie." Taking her face in his hands, fixing her eyes with his, he went on. "Tell me again about his heroic passing."

She squeezed her eyes shut, but she couldn't drown out his voice.

"Come on, Carrie. Get it out and have

done with it forever. He died trying to save a child."

Abruptly, the words broke out of her in a storm of tears and sobs.

"Someone else had already been in the child's bedroom. Denny Cohn, a great fireman, he was Gar's idol. And he said it was too late, there wasn't any way of getting to the bed, there was no way any child could have survived the smoke. And one of the neighbors was screaming that the boy probably wasn't there anyway; he usually spent weekends at his father's. But Gar went in there and . . ."

"And—" James prompted, his voice once more replete with tenderness and yet implacably tough.

"It was as if he wanted to commit suicide!" she exploded, finally uttering the agonizing word she'd turned her mind from these past three years. "The child wasn't there," she went on. "A hero—oh, yes, Gar was a hero. But he was a coward, too, because he couldn't face the ordinariness of everyday life!"

"Ordinariness!" James's mouth whispered across hers. "How could there be any ordinariness with you?"

"But it wasn't like that for Gar and me. There were lots of ordinary moments. He and I—" Abruptly she stopped. Swallowing hard, she said, "I did mean to make him happy."

"And I bet you did make him happy. Maybe happier than he made you. But some people—you, for shining instance—are happy even when they're miserable, and other people are miserable even when they're happy. Nobody deserves credit or blame for being one way or the other."

She pondered his words, moving her head so that she lay against his chest. A peace crept over her, and now she thought surely she would sleep. But she mustn't sleep. If something happened on Dannie's overnight—she wasn't really

expecting snakebites, but Dannie might get homesick—she had to be someplace where she could be reached.

“James, dearest? It’s absolute bliss being out here with you, but I think we should head back to The Ladders now. Dannie and I have never before been separated for the night, and I don’t like the idea that no one knows where I am.”

She expected him to protest, but he said he understood.

As they started back toward The Ladders, his headlights picked out eerie tendrils of mist:

“I can’t go on saying no to you,” she got out, “but I can’t say yes. Not yet. Not with the sort of faith you deserve, a faith to match yours.”

He put a hand on her blue-jeaned thigh. Will you stop fighting it, Esmerelda? Will you admit that Harold has passed the test?”

“Give me one more day,” she said. “To sleep on everything that’s happened, and see Dannie, and somehow find a sign that will tell me what I want to know.”

The next morning, feeling dazed and yet exalted, Carrie put on a fresh pink cotton shirt and a single strand of pearls with her jeans. Glossing her lips to a fare-thee-well, she got ready to meet Dannie’s bus—and to face that dazzling enigma, James Luddington.

But when the busful of overnight campers came climbing up from the access road, James was not to be seen among the eager parents.

Then, just as the bus doors opened, out popped James from behind a parked van, giving her a conspiratorial wave. She realized what he was signaling. She had asked for a day on her own, and he was going to give it to her, by crikey.

Then Dannie was bounding down the steps, and Carrie was running toward

her, thinking of no one else.

“You’ve gotten bigger!” she exclaimed, scooping her daughter up. “Did you have a fabulous time? Oh, where’s your sleeping bag, honey?”

“Phillip’s carrying it. I cut my finger a teensy bit,” Dannie said, proudly holding up a neatly bandaged right index finger, “and Phillip said I shouldn’t carry anything.”

“He did, did he?” Carrie’s mouth was dry as she watched Phillip emerge from the bus, the last one out, clearly slowed down by his down-filled burden.

“It’s all my fault Dannie cut herself,” he said, looking earnestly at Carrie through a mist of yellow bangs. “I should have sharpened her hot dog stick for her. But she wanted to sharpen it herself, and I lent her my knife.”

Looking everywhere but at James, Carrie said, “I’m glad you two made friends. Right now, though, Phillip, Dannie and I have to scoot because we’re going off for the day. And I’d like to beat what looks like rain,” she added, taking note of the massed thunderheads in the eastern sky.

“I know—to the Alpen Slide. Dannie told me,” Phillip piped in his sweet British accent.

At the same time Dannie jumped up and down and said, “Can Phillip and James come with us, Mama? Pretty, pretty please?”

“You and I are going off on an adventure of our own, old son,” James said. “Do you remember the Irish potter you liked so much when you met him in London—Stephen Pearce? His brother Simon blows glass down in a town called Quechee. Furthermore, he’s harnessed the power from the dam behind his works to make all the electricity he needs, and that’s something I want to see.”

“Well, I’d rather go on the Alpen

Slide," Phillip said, just missing sounding all-American sullen.

Dannie and Phillip gave each other a last tragic look before their parents separated them, and then Carrie and Dannie were on their own, and the heart-tossed mother breathed a sigh of almost-relief.

Almost. An hour later, as Carrie turned onto Route 4 from Route 100, Dannie said, "This is the same road we took to go to Quechee!"

"Of course. That's how we found out about the Alpen Slide in the first place."

"Oh, boy! Oh, boy!" Dannie exclaimed, hanging out the window as her mother parked the car. "Look at that chair lift! That's better than the Roosevelt Island tram."

"It is, isn't it, honey?" Carrie said, hoping she sounded sincere. She was comfortable with both height and motion, yet the sight of the blue chairs, rocking on their wire overhead, filled her with foreboding.

As an attendant clanged the safety bar shut over her and Dannie, and their chair began climbing into the sky, Carrie's apprehension seeped away. Really, it was exquisite here.

At the top of the mountain a dark-haired young man in a purple silk warm-up jacket handed them two fiberglass sliding trays and offered them instructions.

"Shouldn't she come down on my sled?" Carrie asked him.

"What's the matter, you afraid to go down by yourself?"

Carrie didn't even pretend to laugh, and he hastily added, "She's what, seven?"

"Only six," Dannie said proudly, "but I'm very precocious."

"The kid cracks me up! Believe me, she can handle the sled herself. This kid could handle a 747, right?"

"Right," Dannie said.

"Don't forget," the young man said, "If it rains, you stop your sled, get right off the track, and walk down. Nobody here's wearing high heels, right?"

"I read the sign," Carrie said stiffly. Something about the fellow's manner really put her off.

But as she and Dannie were walking past him, he turned the other way and Carrie gasped. On the back of the jacket was the word *Oracles!*"

Esmeralda . . . Harold . . . the test . . . the oracle on the mountain.

"What are the Oracles?" Carrie asked. She tried to inject friendliness into her voice.

"There's this little-known sport called baseball," he began, "and we play it."

Dannie tugged at Carrie's leg. "Come on, Mom. Let's slide!"

And slide they did, down the slow track, Dannie going first so Carrie could keep an eye on her. Once Carrie was convinced Dannie wasn't going to sail off the edge of the earth, and she herself wasn't going to come to a calamitous end, what fun it was!

At the bottom of the track she kissed Dannie and said, "Let's go on the fast track now."

Airborne on the chair lift for the second time, Carrie and Dannie tried to identify the various bright blooms below them.

"That's a jack-in-the-pulpit," Carrie said, pointing.

"Where? That purple thing? Oh, yeah. I think they have elves living in them."

Dannie swung her feet as the chair lift slowed to a stop. "I don't like being stopped."

"Me, neither," Carrie said cheerfully. "Nobody does. I'm sure we'll be moving again in a minute."

Carrie heard a rumble, and for a

lovely moment she thought it was the sound of machinery starting up again. Then she realized it was thunder.

"I wish my friend Phillip was here," Dannie said in a frightened voice, "and James. Phillip says James is the smartest man who ever lived. I bet he could make this dumb old chair move."

Carrie put a hand on Dannie's wrist. "Wait a minute, honey. I think someone's trying to tell us something."

Sure enough, the young man in the Oracle jacket was making his way up the ravine below them, broadcasting a message through a bullhorn.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the chair lift is temporarily out of commission due to a short in the control panel, but we are expecting it to be repaired within the hour. You are in absolutely no danger. Repeat, no danger. We regret the inconvenience. So relax and enjoy the view . . . and thank you again for flying Alpen Airlines."

"Wow, did you see that?" Dannie asked as a jagged streak of lightning flashed across the sky.

"Yes—beautiful, wasn't it?" Carrie bit back the desire to scream.

Looking back, she saw the man in the chair behind them making a panicky effort to climb out.

"Oh, Lord," Carrie prayed silently. "Please, please, please, don't let anybody be hurt."

Suddenly, with a glorious, soul-delighting jerk, the chair lift began to move.

After what felt like an eternity, she and Dannie were standing on firm ground.

"Whoopee! Let's go down the fast track," Dannie said. "Hurry, up, Mom, before the rain starts."

And there they were, as though disaster had never come close, sailing down the stream of cement.

Into the arms of James and Phillip.

For a moment of searing bliss the four of them were one big beautiful huddle.

Then all sorts of people descended on them, including the Oracle, the ticket seller, and a man in a suit who came racing across from the parking lot. And everybody seemed to want to shake James's hand.

As Carrie looked inquiringly at him, he gave one of his infinitely casual shrugs and put an arm around her shoulders.

"By great good luck we happened to be in the neighborhood," he began diffidently, "and we were listening to the local news, and we heard that the chair lift at the Alpen Slide was experiencing 'an electrical problem,' and I decided to pop over and offer to give them a hand. And a good thing too," he added as fat drops of rain began to fall and thunder boomed. "Because the electrician who was summoned from Rutland has yet to arrive."

The young man in the Oracle jacket materialized in front of them. He said to James, "I just want to tell you, I had an idea, and I talked to the manager, and he agreed. We'd like to give you a lifetime pass to the Alpen Slide—and that goes for your wife and the kids."

"I'm honored," James said. "And perhaps now the lady will indeed consent to be my wife."

The Oracle winked at Carrie. "I know it's none of my beeswax," he said, "but I think you should marry him. He's really passed the test."

"What do you say to that, Esmerelda?" James asked as the young man disappeared.

Carrie looked into his twinkling silver eyes. "I say you fed him that line, Harold, when you saw what was written on his jacket."

"Sometimes I think you overestimate me, my love."

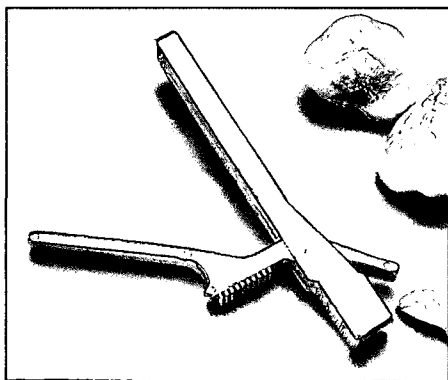
She linked arms with him. "Never."♥

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